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BARRANCA BILL, the Revolver Champion;

Or, THE WITCH OF THE WEEPING WILLOWS.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,

AUTHOR OF "CACTUS JACK," "DON SOMBRERO," "LADY JAGUAR," "THE SCORPION BROTHERS," "CANYON DAVE," ETC., ETC.



"THERE," SAID BARRANCA BILL, POINTING TO THE QUIVERING WEAPON, "IS MY ANSWER: AS MY KNIFE CROSSES YOURS,
SO WILL I MEET YOU IN FIGHT, AS MAN TO MAN."

Barranca Bill,

THE REVOLVER CHAMPION; OR, The Witch of the Weeping Willows.

A Story of Nevada.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,
AUTHOR OF "LONG-HAIRED MAX," "CACTUS
JACK," "DON SOMBRERO," "THE SCOR-
PION BROTHERS," "BUCKSHOT
BEN," "CANYON DAVE,"
"LADY JAGUAR,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAN OF THE HAUNTED LIFE.

UP to the date of our story, there had been nothing in the history of Comet Camp to give it a reputation superior to that of other places of its kind. It owed its existence to the discovery of silver, and those who remember the first flush of Nevada's prosperity know that to be a very ordinary circumstance.

Had no silver ever been found in her earthly bosom, Nevada would be little known to-day.

Hence, Comet Camp, being strictly a silver town, lived a quiet life until upon its cabins descended the shadows of a certain September afternoon.

Then began its drama.

William Lincoln, more commonly known as Barranca Bill, ate his supper that night and then sat down in his private room to enjoy his evening pipe. Life flowed along very smoothly with him, and he had never been in a more placid mood than that evening.

He was superintendent of the Silver King Mine, and his wages were satisfactory; he knew his business and controlled the other employees without effort; he had nothing whatever on his mind; and as people knew that when he saw fit to draw his sixes, he was a man to whom it was safe to give a wide berth, no one ventured to tread on his toes, literally or metaphorically.

Had any one asked Barranca Bill, when he sat down to smoke, if he was a happy man, he would unhesitatingly have answered in the affirmative.

His house—for he owned it clear of incumbrance—was somewhat pretentious for Comet Camp and possessed four rooms, two on the lower and two on the upper floor. There he lived alone, except for the companionship of Hans Vedder, his cook and man-of-all-work.

In the room he liked to call his parlor, Barranca Bill sat and smoked for half an hour, and then, without a sound of warning, the window of the room was pushed up with a bang, and the outstretched San Francisco paper which served as a curtain fluttered back a little before the breeze.

Barranca Bill stared in mild surprise, but it speedily increased to amazement as a man sprung through the opening, dropped the window behind him and then appeared to the superintendent's view.

A very indistinct, brief view was vouchsafed the latter—enough, however, to show that the new-comer's eyes were wild and glaring—and then he cast himself on his knees and raised his clasped hands.

"For heaven's sake, save me!" he cried, in a husky voice.

Barranca Bill arose in speechless surprise. He saw now that though the stranger was of large frame and muscular power beyond the average, he was panting like a hard-run stag and the sweat poured from his flushed face.

"Stop! stop!" he cried, mistaking Bill's motion. "Don't give me up; save me from those cut-throat hounds and I will be your slave forever!"

"Hold a bit!" replied Bill, "and give me a chance to put in my vote. I don't know you from Adam, nor what you're talking about. You've had a race, I reckon—"

"Yes, yes; they chased me like bloodhounds; it was a race for life. Over the rocks we went, all the way from Ramrod Bar and across the Porcupine Ridge, I in wild flight, they close at my heels. There was no more mercy about them than brute bloodhounds would show. How they thirsted for my blood!"

This long speech had been poured forth wildly and vehemently. The man remained on his knees, but he had unclasped his hands to gesture in a manner as wild as his words.

"Suppose you hold on a bit and tell me what's trumps," suggested Barranca Bill, calmly. "Who chased you?"

"The lynchers of Ramrod Bar. They gave me—"

"Why did they chase you?"

"It was a mistake; they said I had committed a crime when I was innocent. Oh! sir, they are on my track now and mad for blood. If they get their hands on me I swing without a trial. That is not right; you know it is not. Oh! save me, save me!"

Once more the man raised his clasped hands

and seemed in such an agony of fear that a feeling of contempt crept over Barranca Bill. He valued his own life above gold and silver, but, driven into a corner, he would die like a hero.

"Git up on your feet," he said, authoritatively. "If you are an innocent man, Comet Camp won't let Ramrod Bar ride the race too rusty."

"Ah! but the weight of evidence is against me," muttered the man, as he arose.

The movement brought the two face to face, and upon the strong features of William Lincoln a strange expression gradually crept. He seemed startled, amazed and confused, and he stared with emotion long a stranger to him.

The new-comer was flashing his gaze about the room as though in search of a hiding-place, so all the foregoing escaped his notice.

Suddenly Bill moved backward a pace and rested one hand on the table as though for support. His face was strangely pale, and his friends of Comet Camp would have been amazed to see him then.

"Horace!" he whispered, huskily.

The fugitive turned quickly, fresh alarm resting on his face.

"Ha!—what?" he cried. "Who are you that— Just Heaven! I am mad or dreaming. But, no, no; it is you. You, you—what are you doing here?"

And then the man who had been called Horace became silent and the two looked at each other, mutually agitated.

Suddenly the fugitive put out his hand.

"William!—brother!" he exclaimed.

Barranca Bill met the salutation in like spirit.

"I am knocked all to pieces, old boy," he said; "I never was so astonished before. What brought you to Nevada?"

"The same restless spirit that possessed you. I could not bear the humdrum life of the New York farm," he answered.

"But they—they—our parents: what of them?" Bill asked, in an unsteady voice.

"Dead, both dead. We are all that remains of the family. But, bark! what sound was that? A human yell—and another. Yes, yes; hear them shout. Willaim, they are my enemies, the lynchers from Ramrod Bar. Oh! hide me, hide me, or I shall be hanged!"

Barranca Bill's mind came galloping back to the present over a wide stretch of miles and years.

"And it is you the lynchers seek—you, they would hang for a crime!" he cried, sharply.

"I swear that I am innocent. Oh! don't think me guilty; let one man believe me innocent. Save me, my brother!"

Standing there face to face a remarkable resemblance was noticeable between the two men. They had the same form, face, hair, eyes, even to the short, brown beard were they alike.

The resemblance was so strong as to be almost startling.

Yet, at that moment, at least, their manner was very different. Barranca Bill might yield to temporary emotion, but he was at all times bold, brave and quick-witted.

Horace Lincoln, however, whatever his usual condition, was at that moment as much weakened by terror as by his long run.

"Save you?" echoed Bill, in a ringing voice, a red flush creeping into his face. "Ay, I'll save you from all Ramrod Bar. No brother of mine shall grace the lynchers' noose. I'll swear you are innocent, and I'll save you if I face the whole gang alone. I'll hide you—"

At this moment the door opened and the superintendent's Dutch servant, Hans Vedder, appeared at the threshold. He was a man of middle age, but one carrying nearly three hundred pounds of flesh and as unwieldy as a healthy man could very well be.

"I dinks der vas a riot outside of der house in der inside of der village, for—"

Thus far Hans spoke, blinking like an owl, but he suddenly paused.

"Mine gracious!" he resumed, after a pause, "I dinks I have trinked too much lager; I can see two of you, Mynheer Bill, an' der riot may have doubled up, too."

Barranca Bill had at first been dismayed at the appearance of his servant at such a moment, for second thought calmed him a good deal. Hans was a man who was generally supposed to know just enough to cook well and drink all the beer he could find, but his master knew him to be an underestimated man.

Hans had his peculiarities; the more he knew, the less he knew; or, to express it more intelligibly, he was shrewd enough to become outwardly a seeming idiot when people tried to extract the little knowledge they supposed he possessed.

Thoroughly devoted to his master, he was a man to be implicitly trusted.

"Hans, come here," said Bill, quickly. "Your eyesight is all right; this man is my brother. He has been unjustly accused, and those men who shout are his enemies. I am going to conceal him, and I rely on you to keep the secret. He is my only brother, Hans, think of that."

"I dinks of nottings an' I knows nottings. I dells them so when they gomes. I dinks I had better be asleep all alone mit myself."

So saying, Hans turned and rolled from the room.

"That man will betray me!" exclaimed Horace.

"Never!" returned Barranca Bill. "He is a safer guardian than you or I; all the lynchers in Nevada could not wring a secret from his lips."

Once more a series of yells arose from outside and the superintendent went to the window and peered out from behind one side of his novel curtain.

"What do you see?" Horace feverishly asked.

"The rioters are searching the town with torches, and the men of Comet Camp seem to have joined forces with them. Every house and cabin is being searched."

Horace was seized with a nervous trembling, but his brother had never been calmer.

Turning away from the window he lifted the lamp from the table.

"Have no fear, brother, we can defy those fellows," he said. "I did not build my house of glass. Come with me and I will secrete you."

Together they ascended the stairs and stood in one of the upper rooms.

"This is my sleeping apartment," said Bill, but it is a place of at least one peculiarity. At this side is a secret room. See!"

The walls were without plastering or paper, being composed of ordinary boards nailed to upright posts and cross-pieces. One of these boards had been removed by the master of the house and a dark space was revealed inside.

"Go in," he said.

Horace obeyed, and, when the light was passed after him, saw a little room which was half-occupied by a couch that rested on the floor.

"You'll be safe as a rat here," said Bill, cheerfully.

"Heavens! they will find the loose board. Is there no other protection?"

"It is enough. Remember they do not know you are in the house, and that as I am a man of some importance here, they will not make a close search. Above all, remember that no one will suspect there is such a den here."

The fugitive was far from being convinced, but as the cries of his enemies arose from directly in front of the house he yielded without further words.

One hand-pressure passed between the brothers and then Barranca Bill withdrew and placed the board. It had a hook by which it could be secured on the inside, and when the work was done he made haste to descend to the lower part of the house.

He had taken care to hide the light of his lamp, so that no attention would be directed to the room, but as he went down the stairs he heard Hans parleying with the men and feared something serious was at hand.

As he stepped quickly forward an angry voice arose at the door.

"Out of the way, you Dutch idiot. I'm Sam Soaper, an' these hyar are ther braves o' Ramrod Bar. We're looking fur Paul Pindar, ther murderer!"

CHAPTER II.

WANTED, A FATHER.

THAT same evening, but slightly previous to the time when Barranca Bill began smoking, a man was striding through the main street of Comet Camp. He met other people by the way, but gave no sign that he saw anything until he paused in front of a house which, judged by the Comet Camp average, was large and imposing.

Any passer-by would have been able to state that it was the residence of Cephas Brown, and had an inquirer confessed that he knew nothing of the gentleman in question, the citizen would have been amazed.

Not know Cephas Brown? Why, any man in the United States ought to know him; for, had not Comet Camp sent him to the Nevada Legislature every year since its existence enabled it to send any one? and had he not become noted, famous, for his speeches on the proper protection of capitalists, the advantages of Nevada as a business center, and the advisability of suppressing the Chinese?

Whether the aforesaid pedestrian knew Cephas Brown's greatness or not, he made no inquiries, but boldly ascended the steps of the house and rung the bell—the only article of the kind of which Comet Camp could boast.

The summons was answered by a young woman whose face was an animated map of Ireland; a rosy-cheeked, comely, and muscular young woman, who looked capable of hard work or the more scientific labor of ejecting an unwelcome guest.

"I wish to see Mr. Cephas Brown," said the applicant, brusquely.

The maid looked at him narrowly, but as he was not one to impress a person with vague ideas of a duke on the wing, her manner became anything but respectful.

"Bedad!" said she, "it's meself is not sure he wants to see yez."

"No words, woman," he said, angrily, "or I will toss you out of the door."

"And what would I be doing the while?" she promptly demanded.

It was the gauntlet of war, but at that mo-

ment another actor appeared on the scene, or, to speak more correctly, a young lady whose loveliness and refinement were in marked contrast with the pair at the door.

Her dress, manner, and general appearance bespoke the daughter of wealth, and the man was so impressed that he awkwardly removed his hat.

"What is it, Katie?" she asked, in a melodious voice.

"Begorra, Miss Vivian, ye can have it ef ye can foind dbe name," Katie answered.

"Hush! Do not talk like that. Sir, do you wish to see any one in the house?"

The man was holding his hat in his hand, turning it nervously about, and awkwardly posing his figure, and though his gaze was fixed on Vivian's face like one who feasts on unusual luxuries, he was plainly ill at ease in her presence.

He was a man young in years—possibly he was twenty-two—and his short, stout figure was that of a man who has gained muscle by hard labor, but his face indicated at once a low order of intelligence, and a connection with the lower sphere of life.

"I want to see Mr. Brown," he mumbled.

"Conduct him at once to my father's room," said Vivian, who knew it was a part of Mr. Brown's creed as a politician to receive any and all callers who saw fit to apply.

"Thankee, miss," muttered the man; and then, as the young lady went on her way, he followed Katie, who, as she conducted him, muttered in turn, the burden of her lamentations being the folly of her master who made "fray an' aqual wid dbe rough-scuff av dbe strates."

Her rap at a neighboring door was answered by a voice bidding her enter, and in a moment more she ushered in the caller.

Mr. Brown, politician, capitalist, and member of the Legislature, was seated at the table, which was loaded with papers and books, a portly, pompous man, who would have made a favorable impression on Wall street, and before whose sublime front Poverty would have stood with awe and an uncovered head.

"A party to see yez," said Katie, independently.

"Retire," said Mr. Brown, tranquilly.

Katie disappeared, and the politician looked at his visitor. As soon as Vivian had gone he had replaced the hat on his head, and with the act had gone all signs of politeness.

He stood before Brown with his hands in his pockets and an air of independence which fell little short of insolence.

All this the politician noted, but Nevada has many forms of eccentricity, and if this caller was a man who knew enough to vote as Mr. Brown would have him, he would have smiled benignly had he walked in on his head and hands.

"Well, my good man, can I do anything for you?" the great man asked.

"I reckon you can," was the prompt reply. "I have come on business."

"Then, be seated and I will hear you at once."

The visitor slouched to a seat, pulled his hat over one eye and tipped back in his chair with the utmost serenity.

"I am deluged with business," continued Brown, "so we will come to the point at once. Proceed!"

The visitor laughed, and the sound was as abrupt and peculiar as his manners.

"It's a long story I have to tell, governor, and I reckon the cock will crow thrice before we get through," he said. "I'm going to begin twenty-three years back."

"Ah! Doubtless you wish me to right some wrong," said Mr. Brown, blandly.

"You catch on like a wolf to a wounded buffalo, governor. That's just the state of the case, there is a wrong to right, though the expression is a little too high-flown for my caliber."

"I am the servant of the people and of justice," said Brown, loftily.

"Correct to a die-spot. Well, I'll come right down to business and waste no time on preliminaries. Here goes: Twenty-three years ago last June, a young blood of New Orleans left his house and went to Tennessee to spend the summer among the mountains. He had lived too fast for his good in the Crescent City, and his doctor ordered him to give up style and wine for awhile, and recruit his energies on fresh air and quiet. Good advice, eh, governor?"

"Very," said Mr. Brown.

His manner had changed somewhat; he seemed less lofty and pompous, and as he unconsciously caressed his chin, he looked searchingly at his visitor.

The latter was a man worthy of more than a casual glance. He was not comely in any way. His short, stout figure was ill-proportioned at the best—he had narrowly escaped being a hunchback—and his appearance was not improved by ill-fitting garments.

His complexion was very dark, and his hair, eyebrows and small mustache were jet-black, so that the combination made him appear almost like an Italian.

Under heavy, prominent brows, small, restless

eyes nestled as though in ambush; and though the face, as a whole, was one of a very low order of intelligence, the eyes and general expression gave him a look of great cunning of an animal nature.

Not once abandoning his independent air, he continued:

"The young blood went to Tennessee and settled down, and there he stayed all summer. How did he live?—quietly, peacefully and frugally? Well, I reckon not. Up there among the mountains he found people of such an ignorant turn of mind that he was disgusted, but in the midst of the desert he found an oasis.

"Barbarous as were the people, they had a school where the youngsters pretended to learn, and the teacher thereof was a young lady named Dora Hilton. Our young blood saw her, and from that moment he haunted her pathway. She was only a poor girl but she had the nature of a lady, and he not only cottoned to her a good bit, but ended by falling dead in love."

Mr. Brown caressed his chin softly and his bland face told no tales, but a suspicious flush was visible on his features.

He was ill at ease.

"I might spin this yarn out to a great length, but as time is precious I'll let you imagine the wayside drama and say that in August the blood and the school-teacher were married by the old minister of the village. A few weeks went by all on the square, and she, at least, was perfectly happy. She was without a flaw in her own nature, and she thought him a god.

"He—well, he liked her as well as one of his selfish nature could, and all went well until cool weather approached and the season of gayety in New Orleans was at hand. Then his feelings changed. His highest aims were to be a man of fashion among his gay friends, and a single man at that; to be a blood, the *ne plus ultra* of elegance—and there he was, tightly married to a poor girl who knew nothing of life outside a country village.

"For a while he cursed his folly in marrying her, and all things combined made him wish her dead. Perhaps he reflected on the advisability of murdering her, but of that I have no proof, for his wit found a better way.

"Natural craftiness had led him to say, when he came to Tennessee, that he was Roderic Raymond, of Richmond, Virginia, and no one had yet suspected otherwise. The old minister who had done the marriage act suddenly died, and the blood made three moves on the board in quick succession.

"First, he burned the marriage-certificate which his wife had framed in a rustic way and hung on the wall; secondly, he broke into the church and stole the leaf containing the record of the marriage; and, thirdly, he packed his valise and hastened back to New Orleans without a word to any one.

"He believed that ended his drama of folly, and as no word came from the deserted wife the idea looked likely.

"Let me follow her. When she really knew she was a deserted wife, she went to her home, some twenty miles away, and with her head on her mother's knee, said: 'Let me die!' That was her way; she did not intend to follow her false husband. The old woman—her mother—was made of different stuff. She went at once to Richmond, but Roderic Raymond was not known there."

The narrator paused for a moment. His manner was still the same, brusque, independent and, on the whole, aggressive, but Mr. Brown did not cease to caress his chin. Still, underneath his mask of blandness, there were signs of uneasiness.

"The runaway husband was not found," resumed the visitor, "and it was many years before any one knew the truth. In the meanwhile, the young wife had died, but she did not leave her mother alone. To the tender care of the old woman was confided a child, a boy, which was the offspring of Roderic Raymond and his wife."

The eyes of the visitor were closely scanning the politician's face, and he did not fail to see the slight start he made.

"Aha!" he exclaimed, "so that touches you, does it?"

"Touches me?" repeated Brown, in seeming amazement, "why should it touch me?"

"Because you are Roderic Raymond!" was the swift reply.

Mr. Brown put out his hands in deprecation.

"I?" he repeated.

"You!" said the visitor, coolly, as he swung one leg over the other and ran his thumbs into the arm-holes of his vest—a position at once insolent and aggravating, when combined with his manner.

"Good heavens! young man, are you insane?"

"I'm almighty methodical for a madman, and I've got a tenacious hold on the points of this game."

"So you acknowledge it is a game?"

"A game to secure justice."

"And what have you to do with the affair, anyhow?"

"A good deal, my lord duke, for I am the son of Dora Hilton and Roderic Raymond, whose real name is Cephas Brown."

CHAPTER III.

NOT WANTED—A SON!

Mr. CEPHAS BROWN had devoted portions of many years to gaining a manner and an expression which should effectually hide all his feelings, but before the startling claim of this vulgar young man he sat dumfounded, startled, and full of consternation, and every emotion was plainly expressed on his sleek visage.

Yet he rallied with considerable quickness, aided in his work by his visitor's aggravating air.

He even managed to laugh.

"This is the most absurd thing I ever heard," he said. "Why, you are wild, mad, raving, crazy. If you believe all you say, you are the victim of some person who has more audacity than wisdom."

"That's all right for you to say, governor, and I can't say I blame you. I'd put in a denial myself if I stood in your shoes, but you see I am at present on the other side of the fence. I am your son, your eldest child, and I want my rights."

His lips rolled back, revealing his teeth, and his look was wolfish; and Brown saw that he had a bad man with whom to deal.

"You are audacious, insolent!" he cried. "I know nothing of Dora Hilton, Roderic Raymond, or any of the crowd. I was never in Tennessee; I'll swear to it."

"That's all right, governor, and I don't blame you, but I've drifted about the world and played the football act as long as I care to. Now, I've got proof for all I say, and I claim my rights."

"This is a case of blackmail," said Brown. "I have some money and you have put up a job to make me feed you. It won't work, though; I'll see you in perdition before I pass over a cent."

"Soft and easy, governor; I tell you I can prove all I assert. Besides, money won't satisfy me. I want a name. Here I've rolled about on ship and shore as Luke Gridley, and when any one asked for my pedigree I was stuck. I tell you I'm in search of a father."

"You'd better look further, then," growled Mr. Brown. "When I want a son, I'll do my own picking. You won't satisfy my taste."

A deeper color crept into the visitor's face, and his eyes flashed ominously.

"Look out, old man!" he said, warningly. "I am a lamb when the wind blows soft, but stick a harpoon in my hide and I squirm bad. Don't speak against the man who is to eat side by side with you and the charming Vivian."

"You infernal scoundrel!" shouted Brown, "how dare you take her fair name on your lips?"

"Oh! ho! so she is too good to be spoken of, is she? Well, I shall see. Ten to one you introduce me to her as your son, before a fortnight."

Brown made an impatient gesture.

"Let this nonsense cease," he said, more sharply than usual. "What reason have you to believe I am this Roderic Raymond, and how do you expect to prove it?"

"You must excuse me if I don't show my hand too plainly for my own good. You hold the cash-box in this case, and money often buys witnesses. I prefer to keep mine away from the delusive rattle of your gold. Enough that I swear that I can prove that you, Cephas Brown, left New Orleans, as I have said, and spent the summer in the Tennessee mountains. You have been recognized as Roderic Raymond, and I can establish all I claim."

"Enough, though all the records of the marriage are lost."

"The witnesses still live."

"And how can you prove that you are Dora Hilton's child?"

"By witnesses just as reliable as the others. Rest assured, Luke Gridley is the child of Dora Hilton."

Mr. Brown was again caressing his chin. The blow had fallen, and its first effects somewhat overcome, he was once more the cunning man of the world.

"My dear young sir," he said blandly, "I wish to think well of you, for your frank and open face is prepossessing; but I am forced to believe you are in the hands of sharpers. If this is so, let me—"

"Save your breath, governor; I'm not a cat's-paw for anybody; this is my own show. I am in the game all alone, but I am so bolstered up with witnesses that you might as well throw the anchor at once. See here, governor, be sensible; I'm going to prove all I say, and I'll be led a heap easier than drove. Cry war, and the house of Brown will be in an uproar."

And then Mr. Gridley pushed his hat back on his head, and looked at the politician with one eye open and the other closed, while his impudence would have caused Brown to throw him from the room—if he could—had it not been for that little Tennessee episode.

He settled back in his chair with a look of dogged determination.

"Use your own judgment in the matter, but let me say once for all that I shall not submit to anything so absurd. I am not Roderic Ray-

Barranca Bill, the Revolver Champion.

mond; I was never in Tennessee; I never knew this Dora Hilton; while as for your claim—bah! it is absurd."

"You decline to come to terms?"

"I do, sir."

"Then I shall oblige you to."

Brown smiled blandly.

"Try it," he answered softly.

"I certainly shall, and it will be a dark day for you. Do you think I have come here before I am fully prepared for war? No, sir; I am not a fool."

"Then show some sense," said Brown, irritably.

"If it isn't sensible to aspire to be the heir of a half-million dollars, then I don't know what the word means."

"So-ho! the cloven foot shows. You aspire to handle the family dollars."

"And to have a name."

Mr. Brown shrugged his shoulders unbelievably, but at that moment a chorus of yells in front of the house caused him to delay his reply. For some time he had heard occasional shouts outside, but, supposing some warm-blooded citizen of the place was on the war-path with a flask under one arm and a revolver under the other, he paid no attention until obliged to do so.

Like an echo to the disturbance came a rap at the door, and as the politician recognized it, he glanced uneasily at Gridley.

He had hesitated to bid the applicant enter, but before he could think deliberately, the door was pushed open and Vivian entered.

"Oh! father," she exclaimed, "there is a mob at the door and they are demanding entrance. What is wrong?—what do they want?"

Miss Brown seemed considerably excited, but she had a brave nature under her fair exterior and she was not a person to indulge in any real weakness.

For a while, the politician had been troubled at the thought of having his daughter seen by Luke Gridley, but he forgot all else as another series of yells arose with a force and angry inflection which told how much in earnest were the men.

They began to hammer at the door, too, and a frown crossed Brown's face. The men of Comet Camp had not ventured on such rudeness since he had been first sent to the Legislature.

With a smothered exclamation he strode to the window, while Gridley arose and advanced a step toward Vivian.

"Don't be afraid," he said, familiarly, "for if those fellows behave roughly I'll see you safely through the row."

Miss Brown, having a good deal of her father's diplomacy, had always been gracious to his business acquaintances, but this ill-favored young man's voice jarred on her nerves and her pretty lips curled in perceptible scorn.

"Don't trouble yourself," she said, clearly. "The men of Comet Camp will not harm me, and even if there should be trouble, I can care for myself."

She drew a dainty little revolver from her pocket, and, failing to see that the movement contained a hint for himself, Gridley looked in admiration.

"By George! you're a clipper!" he coarsely said.

This remark would have been bluntly resented by the girl, but at that moment her father's voice arose in a Roman-like shout:

"Ha!—without there! What means this roar?"

The cries of the other men ceased at once, and then a single voice made reply:

"Open your door, old feller; we've come on biz."

The familiarity of the man shocked Mr. Brown.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" he demanded, in a manner less bland than usual.

"I'm Jack Joyce, an' these hyar are ther boyees o' Ramrod Bar. We ain't on a t'ar, but we have holed a murderer in this hyar camp, an' we're a-gwine ter hev him ef we s'arch ev'ry house."

"There is no murderer here."

"He may hev crawled in unseen by you. Some critter has breathed in my ear that you're a big gun on wheels, an' Jack Joyce ain't no fool; but you sart'ainly ain't a'posed ter a'sarch."

The lynchers had grown duly respectful, and rather pleased, Mr. Brown replied that the search should be made.

He then turned toward the door, but Luke Gridley laid one hand on his arm.

"Say the word, and if there's a row, I'll back you for all I'm worth. I carry a pair of sixes, and when I sling lead human flesh stings."

"Out of my way!" said Brown, haughtily. "I tell you I will have nothing to do with you. Get out of the house, will you? Ha! an idea strikes me. It may be you are the man the Barites want."

Luke smiled grimly.

"Don't deceive yourself with such hepes, my dear sir; I am not the man. Just you look out, though, that I don't do you a mischief."

"Bah!"

Brown hastened toward the outer door, but when Gridley would have followed, he was confronted by Vivian. A new light shone in her eyes and she spoke somewhat sharply.

"What do you mean by that?" she demanded.

"By what?" he stammered.

"You threatened to do my father a mischief.

What did you mean?"

"Why, I—I—I didn't mean anything; I was only joking."

"It is false. Men of your class do not joke thus with Mr. Brown. You are his enemy. Why?"

Gridley was confused and excited. At first sight of Miss Brown, when he entered, he had paid mute homage to her beauty, after his fashion, and now, though she confronted him so sharply, he had none of the assurance and courage he had shown when interviewing the politician.

"Confound it!" he said, "you are wrong; I'm not the—the—Mr. Brown's enemy. I meant that my presence here might weight against him."

The claimant believed that he had found a happy explanation, but Vivian's expression did not soften, and he blessed the chance which made the lynchers rush in like a flock of sheep the moment Brown opened the door.

At their head was a burly fellow of the "tough" variety, and as he waved a revolver like a black flag, he eased his mind as follows:

"I'm Jack Joyce, and I'm a bombshell on wheels. When I'm ter home, I'm a chief, an' I don't take water in Comet Camp. If I set ther axis o' my eye on Paul Pindar, out goes his binnacle-light, by thunder."

"I understood you to say you were in search of a murderer," said Mr. Brown, who was accustomed to the eccentricity of bordermen, "and I beg that you will search the house at once."

Jack Joyce was about to reply when one of his followers—a man with a patriarchal gray beard—suddenly darted forward and extended one hand toward Cephas Brown.

"That's him! that's him!" he exclaimed, shrilly.

It was an exciting lit'l episode, but Jack Joyce treated it with undisguised contempt.

"That is who?" he asked. "Oh! go an' put your head on ice, you old idiot. Either go slow, or wind your weavin' way back to Ramrod Bar."

The advice seemed good enough, but the old man was not so easily convinced. He uttered a snarl like that of a wild beast, and with a tremendous leap flung himself upon Brown and bore him to the floor, his fingers clutching his throat.

CHAPTER IV.

BARRANCA BILL FACES THE LYNCHERS.

WHEN Barranca Bill descended to the lower part of the house after concealing his brother, he had but one thought—to conceal Horace from the fury of the men of Ramrod Bar.

In thus doing, it did not once occur to him that Horace might be guilty; he was his brother, he had said he was innocent, and Bill's mind was too noble to harbor a doubt.

Hans Vedder was parleying with the would-be lynchers.

"Durn your hide; git out o' ther way!" roared one. "I'm Sam Soaper and I'm a bad man let loose. When I toss the sixes ther 'arth shakes, an' ef you don't git out o' ther way I'll fall on ye."

"Shust you wait von minute py yourself alone," said Hans, "and ven I gets der lamp lighted I'll show you all arourt ter house."

"Have you heerd a man inside?"

"I ain't heerd nottings," was the stolid reply.

"Would you know ef it war so?"

"I don't know nottings."

"Durned ef I don't believe ye," said Soaper; but at that moment Barranca Bill pushed to the front.

"What is the trouble here?" he calmly asked.

Soaper recognized the voice of one accustomed to command and replied accordingly.

"It's all right, squar', an' we don't mean any harm, but thar's been a cowardly murder at Ramrod Bar an' we've chased ther culprit ter Comet Camp. He's hid somewhar' an' we are arter him."

"You can rely on me to do all I can," replied Bill, who did not say whether he would work for their good or ill.

By this time Hans had succeeded in striking a light, simply because he saw no reason for further delay, and the various parties looked at each other.

Instantly a tremendous roar arose from the lynchers.

"Paul Pindar!"

"Seize him!"

"Get a rope and find a place to hang him!"

These shouts astonished Barranca Bill, but as the men started toward him he comprehended the cause of their sudden fury.

In boyhood the two brothers, William and Horace, had been strongly alike in look, and even in the midst of their latest interview Bill had noticed that they were not only dressed

similarly, but that their beards and hair were much alike.

Plainly he had now been mistaken for his brother.

Had he been confronted by the officers of the law this would not have been a serious matter, for he could easily prove that he was not Paul Pindar, but lynchers never wait for technicalities.

All this flashed upon Barranca Bill as they made their rush, and with it came the realization that he must make a bold stand for his life or he would speedily be swinging from an impromptu gallows, so when the Barites made their rush he leaped backward a pace and placed his back against the wall.

Another moment and a pair of revolvers flashed in the light.

"Halt!" cried Bill, in a ringing voice.

It was but one word, and there seemed no time for more, but at the command and the gleaming sixes the lynchers stood corrected. As one man they paused, and none was more ready than Sam Soaper, who had so lately modestly claimed to be a bad man of an ultra type.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, gentlemen," continued Barranca Bill, "but as I am not Paul Pindar I must decline to swing for his sins."

"Oh! you go away, you durnation critter," said Soaper. "Don't try that dodge. Don't we all know ye like ye was our brother? Don't play ther fool, but ef ye are still on your shoot, say ther word an' I'll meet ye in a squar' tug."

"Nobly spoken, Mr. Soaper, but you are barking up the wrong tree. You say I am Paul Pindar, and I say I am not. It strikes me I ought to know my pedigree as well as an alien. Before you proceed to hostilities, let me request you to call in four or five of the men of Comet Camp and ask them who I am."

"Bah! You are a gambler, blackleg and—"

"Hold up, Mr. Soaper, or I'll take the lead in hostilities. You are way off, and I rather pity you, but I swear no man can insult me thus. One more word of the kind and my sixes talk!"

It was evident that the cool man by the wall meant business and Sam Soaper lost his thirst for blood, but the rear guard, who were in no danger from flying lead, began to surge and murmur impatiently:

"Down with him! Go in, Sam! Pile onto him!"

"Don't you do it," advised Bill. "Keep your places or Ramrod Bar will be depopulated."

"Hol' on! hol' on!" said Soaper, hastily. "Don't play with them triggers. Mebbe we had better cut an' deal ag'in. You say you ain't Paul Pindar. Prove et, an' we braves will be turned ter singin' canaries."

"Send out and bring in the first four men you find; I don't care who they are if they live at Comet Camp. Bring 'em in."

It was a fair offer, and brave as the lynchers really were, they concluded to try the experiment before daring the wrath of this bold man. Some of them even began to be shaken in their views, for, great as was the resemblance, Barranca Bill had a way they had never observed in Paul Pindar.

Consequently there began to be a call for Comet Camp dwellers, and as the antics of the lynchers had thoroughly stirred up the village they had invaded, such men were not hard to find.

Several of them came in and swore to Barranca Bill's identity.

Sam Soaper extended his hand and made a rude apology, and then Bill pocketed his revolvers and peace reigned along the picket line.

"I shall be pleased to show you over my house, gentlemen," said the cool superintendent, "and if you find any cut-throats stored away it's proper you should give them an airing. The light, Hans."

And then, outwardly as cool as ice, but really greatly alarmed for his brother, Bill led the way from room to room.

A duly systematic search was made, but no one suspected the existence of the secret den; and though Horace Lincoln, crouching behind the frail cover, shivered with fear, no move was made which heralded danger.

Thus, when Barranca Bill bade the lynchers good-day at the door, Soaper made another apology and pronounced him a square man; and the superintendent's troubles would probably have ended for the night had it not been for another little event, to understand which we must for a brief time retrace our steps in course of narrative.

On one of the streets of the village stood a square shanty of uncouth workmanship, over the door of which was nailed a sign equally unpretentious so far as symmetry went.

It bore a somewhat pretentious legend, however:

"GENTLE JOHN:

"HIS BOWLING ALLEY."

This was one of the temples of amusement which enterprise had given to Comet Camp, and the man who conducted it found an ample return for the capital he had invested.

Business was nearly always good in the evening, and the first really dull occasion he saw

was when the lynchers invaded the town. Then, away went every patron, and Gentle John was left in utter despair, with no companion except the meek Chinaman who did his menial work.

Gentle John plunged his hands deep into his pockets, and with his hat jammed down over his eyes, scowled ferociously at the ten-pins which stood in line, with a metaphorical chip on their shoulders, or lay *hors du combat*, according as the end of the interrupted games had left them.

"Hang riots!" said Gentle John, disconsolately, "an' hang ther hull durned business. What do I keer ef Comet Camp es rollin' in gore? Let loose ther bull-dogs o' war an' let natur' howl. Thar's four pins down, an' not a cent ter show fur ther scars they got."

"Me set 'em up ag'in?" asked the Chinaman, softly.

"Set 'em up! No, you durned idyit. Dye s'pose anybody'll prance in hyar an' invest when they kin knock over live ten-pins outside, an' never pay for it? No; I guess not!"

"Melican man howl welly loud."

"Let 'em howl. Durn their ugly hides, I hope they will bu'st. Them galoots owed me seventy-two cents fur knockin' out my pins, an' I'm afeerd I shall hev ter detract et from your wages, Bad Lung."

A look of alarm crossed the Celestial's face.

"Ki-hi! dat welly muchee no light!" he plaintively declared. "Me no makes liot; me no makes 'Melican moke lun out an' not payee. Me work welly hard some other timee; me settee 'em up welly quick."

Gentle John did not reply, but after a mournful look at the disordered pins, himself set them into place, handling each one tenderly, and complaining if he found a scar on their hard surface.

He was a man of middle age, short, broad-shouldered and muscular, and with his rough face, tangled hair and beard, and his miner's dress, made a fair specimen of the Western veteran; but he was by no means a rough—he had a big heart, and all his tenderness was lavished on his ten-pins.

Bad Lung, his assistant, was a typical Chinaman, except that he was wonderfully plump. His round face was a portable chart of contentment, and he had a way of handling the pins which pleased Gentle John.

The latter had just finished arranging his pins when, without any warning, a young lady darted through the door and seized his hand.

"Help! help!" she cried wildly.

"Hey! What—what— Oh, I see! Set 'em up ag'in, Bad Lung—"

Thus far had Gentle John spoken, when through the door darted two more persons—this time burly men, on whose faces was plainly written "rough," and the woman clung closer to John.

"Save me—save me!" she gasped.

Luckily for her, she had not mistaken her man. Gentle John was a model of chivalry, and in a moment more a revolver gleamed in each of his hands.

"Set 'em up ag'in, Bad Lung!" he roared, and then the roughs came to a sudden halt as his weapons frowned upon them.

"Hands up, an' take et easy," added Gentle John. "This ain't no place for a riot, an' you'd better skip ther ranch."

"Hold hard, thar!" retorted one of the roughs. "Don't you mix in this game or you'll git your last hurt."

"What in durnation be you hyar fur?"

"After that girl."

"Wal, you can't hev her. Make a note o' that an' set 'em up ag'in. I hold ther fort an' ther big guns are loaded."

"We are two ter one, an' we mean business," declared the man. "Get out o' ther way, or down you go eatin' lead!"

CHAPTER V.

ANOTHER CALL FOR BARRANCA BILL.

IT was very evident that the two roughs meant mischief. They were of the class that has no respect for honor and little fear of law; the only way to quell them was through the power of muscle and revolver, and even in defeat they would be vicious.

Before their savage front the girl stood in alarm, but Gentle John did not waver in the least. He stood like a rock, and to his side crept Bad Lung, a ten-pin grasped in each of his chubby hands.

He was not a prince of the revolver, but loyalty to his employer demanded some exertion on his part.

"I reckon," observed Gentle John, "that we had better wipe off ther blackboard, set 'em up ag'in, an' start fresh. Intimidation won't go down hyar, an' I'll presarve ther sanctitude of my ranch or make blood run wild. You'd better git!"

"We won't git!" shouted the rough. "Fur ther last time, will you give up ther gal?"

"No," said Gentle John, sturdily.

It was the red flag of battle, and the leading rough dropped one hand to a level, deftly slipping a revolver from his sleeve and presenting it with the same motion.

A greater mistake was never made. There was a rush of something through the air, the report of Gentle John's revolver, and the fellow reeled back and fell to the floor.

"All down but nine," said John, cheerfully; "who comes next?"

But the second rough, instead of rushing to close quarters, stared blankly at his fallen and insensible comrade. He was without a wound, for the revolver shot had been a trifle later than the ten-pin which Bad Lung had launched with admirable accuracy, but for the time he was out of the fight.

"Do you chip in?" Gentle John continued.

"Nary chip; I cave!" was the hasty reply. "Jest hold your lead, an' ef you say so, I'll pull Dick Ellis out o' ther way."

The idea was a good one, and with permission granted the building was soon cleared.

"May Heaven bless you, sir," said the young woman, warmly. "I can say no more, for words are weak in such a case."

"You're entirely welcome, marm, but I want ter call your attention ter my yaller boy. Did ye observe how Bad Lung tossed ther pin?"

"Me settee 'em up ag'in?" meekly asked his follower.

"Yas, set 'em up, fur I reckon horstilities is over. Set 'em up, an' I'll see this female critter home."

"I wish to find the house of Mr. Cephas Brown," she hurriedly said. "I had started from the hotel they call the Cosey Corral when I was interrupted by those men. I am terribly alarmed, I confess, and if you had not so bravely aided me it would have been far worse—I shudder when I think of those brutes."

"I don't shudder es I know on, though ther idee is good, but I'll see you straight through ter ole Brown's; an' wo be ter any biped who tries ter stop us."

"Thank you, Mr.—"

"Gentle John—only one J."

"And my name is Helen Neville."

Introductions having thus been made, the party proposed to depart. John had only to slip another load into the empty chamber of his revolver, but Bad Lung, who always followed his master, secretly thrust a ten-pin under his Celestial coat.

"Mebbe we hab to knockee 'em all down but nine," he murmured to himself.

And then they passed out of the shanty and stood in the rough street. Night was less pronounced than usual that evening, for from one end to the other of the village men were out with various kinds of lights—mostly the pine torches obtained by the lynchers on their journey.

Miss Neville shivered as she looked the scene over, and there was ample reason for fear. Comet Camp had awakened before the antics of the men of Ramrod Bar, and it required no great genius to see that serious trouble might occur before the night grew old.

Whatever Gentle John thought he expressed no fear, but with a confident air moved along the street followed by Miss Neville and Bad Lung, in order. The latter looked b'and and meek as ever, but under his flowing coat his hand caressed the ten-pin and he was a bad man in sheep's clothing.

Gentle John was not long in perceiving that a direct course toward Mr. Cephas Brown's residence would take them into the midst of a howling section of the mob, and as he was not sure they would look on his protegee with favor, he wisely made a slight detour.

All went well until they approached the house of Superintendent Lincoln, and there John perceived several of the lynchers; but they were in so quiet a mood that he pushed forward without fear, and was soon abreast the door.

Using his eyes, he saw Barranca Bill bidding adieu to Mr. Sam Soaper and his followers, and it was clear they had just finished an amicable search of the place for Paul Pindar.

Gentle John maintained a dignified silence, and he was just congratulating himself on taking Miss Neville safely through when that young lady, to speak metaphorically, knocked him off his pins.

With a little cry, she suddenly darted from his side, pushed the lynchers right and left, and in a moment more had seized the hand of Barranca Bill.

Every spectator stood in amazed silence, but her voice arose clearly and joyfully.

"Oh! Donald, Donald! Is this you?—are you alive? I had thought you dead—oh, Donald! I am so glad to see you!"

She ceased, and for a moment not a sound was audible. Gentle John, Sam Soaper, and all the others stood with their eyes turned toward the principals in the scene, wondering what it all meant.

Barranca Bill, on his part, seemed amazed, confused and embarrassed. He was a brave man, but this affectionate greeting in public from a pretty woman was a little more than his nerves could stand.

Miss Neville was caressing his hands, and her face was full of joy.

"Oh! I have searched for you so long!" she said, in a plaintive voice.

Bill disengaged one hand and brushed the perspiration from his forehead.

"I reckon you're on the wrong trail, miss," he observed. "I am not named Donald, while as for you, though I would feel honored by your acquaintance, I never saw you before."

The young woman stood amazed and speechless, and Bill's eyes were keen enough to see that some of the rich color receded from her face.

"Oh! Donald, Donald!" she said, as though frightened.

"There is some mistake," said the superintendent, gently; "you are deceived by a resemblance, I suppose. Whom did you take me to be?"

"You are Donald Lander," she said, faintly.

"You are wrong, my dear young lady. I am named William Lincoln, and that is the name I have borne ever since I left my cradle. I am not Donald Lander, and I never heard of the man before."

She uttered a wild cry.

"Oh! Donald, Donald; do not deny me thus! Do not forsake one who would die for you! Have you forgotten the old days? Have you forgotten me?"

"It is not one of my weaknesses to forget, but you I never saw before. I am sorry to thus pain you, but if I bowed to the wind I should be a bogus article. Rather than that, let me tell the truth, and if you have lost a friend I'll do my level best to help you find him."

It was a frank, manly offer, but it did not satisfy Miss Neville. On the contrary, she burst into tears, and, once more seizing his hand, sunk on her knees and began pleading and moaning at one and the same time.

The men of Ramrod Bar began to look at each other and mutter darkly. They were men who were rough from their boot-heels up, and always ready to drop an enemy in a fight, but for the female sex they had a sort of rude, chivalrous respect; and, believing this handsome woman, they began to scowl on Barranca Bill.

Gentle John stood mute in the background; the case had gone beyond his control and he began to realize the nature of the work he had engaged in when he undertook to pilot around a woman.

Sam Soaper, however, did not permit him to remain neutral.

"See hyar, who's this anngel?" he asked.

"Wal, now, you hev me thar, fur I can't tell; I'm actin' ez her guide, an' furder than that, ther testator sayeth not."

"Me knowee her welly wal," chimed in Bad Lung. "She comes in on stagee this evenin' an' stoppes at 'Melican Hotelee."

"So-ho! a stranger in a strange place," commented Sam Soaper. "I reckon ther pilgrim yonder is a runaway husband. Durnation! I chip in hyar!"

With these words he slouched up to Barranca Bill and struck him a resounding blow on his shoulder.

"I say, pard, what's this racket?" he asked.

The interruption, coming at such a moment, annoyed Bill, but he kept his coolness as usual.

"It is all a mistake," he said, quietly. "This lady mistakes me for some other man."

"Tis no mistake!" cried Miss Neville. "Oh, Donald, Donald, what horrible mystery is this—why do you deny your identity? Think of the happy days of the past, of all we have been to each other, and then end this jest, if such it is, and acknowledge that you know me."

It was a thrilling appeal, but another speaker was before Barranca Bill and every gaze was turned on a new actor who appeared on the scene.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WITCH OF THE WEEPING WILLOWS.

"LIGHT and soft, my lady: why don't yer ask for eternal life? Who ever heard of honor in a man?"

Such were the words which, arising immediately after Helen Neville's appeal, caused every one to look at the speaker.

The men of Ramrod Bar were treated to a rather interesting sight. They saw a woman old in years, bent and withered of form and truly witch-like of general appearance, so that those who had seen Macbeth on the boards instinctively recalled the caldron trio of that play.

Probably the woman was less than seventy years old, but, except in point of strength, she might have claimed to be a hundred. Her form and face were very attenuated, and over the latter were numerous wrinkles; the total absence of teeth brought her nose and chin into close companionship, her eyes were deep-set and restless, and over her neck fluttered, coarse, uncombed and erratic gray hair; while a man's hat of true Western style, and a long black cloak, made a somewhat unique form of dress.

As she stood before the crowd she leaned her bent form on a long staff which was forked at the top, and to some she seemed very feeble; but the men of Comet Camp, knowing her well, also knew that almost masculine strength lurked in her long, bony arms.

Down at the further end of the town was a

Barranca Bill, the Revolver Champion.

place called a hotel, but few travelers cared to risk their lives in its evil walls. Over the door was a sign which bore the picture of two trees, and the hotel was commonly known as the "Weeping Willows."

Trade was never dull there, but as its patrons were the worst roughs that ever came to Comet Camp—thieves, road-agents and murderers—it was the hardest place for miles around.

The old woman before mentioned was its sole proprietor. Nobody knew her name, and though some student of Shakespeare had named her "Hecate," she was usually referred to simply as the "Witch."

Her character was in keeping with her hotel, and as she had ways of inflicting injury and death not practiced by the male population, she had such a reputation that the boldest rough dared not lay a hand on her in anger.

Such was the woman who appeared on the scene and uttered the words with which this chapter opens.

No one seemed pleased to see her, for even Helen Neville shrunk back in instinctive fear.

Hecate, however, was not troubled with diffidence.

"State your case to me, my lady, and I'll see you safely through," she said, breaking the pause which followed her first words.

"It is nothing," faltered Helen, shrinking from her fierce eyes.

"Nothing? And is it nothing for men to play with the hearts of women? Come, I have heard of such things before, and I am not surprised. More than that, I always stand ready to protect young girls thus situated, and I'll do it now. I've heard what you have said already; now let me hear the rest. This man married you, tired of his bride as men will and ran away. Am I not right?"

Helen glanced at Barranca Bill and made no reply, but an angry flush crept into his face. He could be as gentle as a woman with Helen, who was plainly deserving, but it was a different matter when the Witch of the Weeping Willows came to the front.

"My good woman," he said, "don't lose any time on us. We are able to manage our own affairs."

"Oh, yes; you want to git rid of those who will speak for a wronged wife," sneered Hecate. "That's all very natural, but I won't go."

"Stand whar you be an' we'll use ye fur a hitchin'-post," said a voice from the crowd.

The Witch wheeled suddenly.

"Who speaks?" she cried, shrilly. "Who dares insult me?"

No one answered; the man, whoever he was, had no ambition to face the redoubtable Witch, and she began a torrent of abuse, punctuated by waves of her staff, during which Barranca Bill again turned to Miss Neville.

"Young woman," he said, bluffly, "it seems you mistake me for some other man, and as I am always ready to do what is right, I'll talk the matter over and lend a helping hand, if you will step inside; but I'll be hanged if I stand here in the crowd and waste more breath."

"It seems to me you are very cool about the matter," she said, somewhat resentfully.

"I don't see the sense of heroics, on my part. Boiled down, I'm only a passenger, though you take me for the man at the ribbons, and I've no call to wake the echoes to any great extent."

"Do you still deny that you are Donald Landner?"

"Yes."

"Then, by Heaven, you are a perjured villain. When you stand here and deny your identity to me, you lose the last grain of claim to my sympathy."

"Soft and slow, miss; be sure you're right before you beat the drum—"

Barranca Bill did not lose his calmness, and he had no intention of being disrespectful, but to Helen Neville, who was a new-comer at the West, his language seemed intended to irritate; and to her spirited nature it was like a match touched to powder.

Bill's last sentence was left unfinished as she suddenly drew a revolver from her dress. One moment it glittered in the light of the torches, and as its muzzle covered Bill's breast he seemed likely to go out of a world of trouble; but with a quick leap Sam Soaper sprung forward and grasped her hand.

Accordingly to Sam's belief, the superintendent had used the lynchers squarely, and though he had no desire to chip in when Comet Camp quarreled, he meant to save a life if he could.

His interference saved Bill temporarily, but as he held Helen's arm upward only a brief tableau was vouchsafed the others.

The Witch of the Weeping Willows seemed to think she had a call, and with wonderful agility she swept her staff through the air. A thud followed as it encountered Sam's head, and then down to the ground went the stricken man.

The act was detrimental to the interests of peace, for the lynchers were men prompt to avenge an injury to one of their crowd, even though the transgressor was a woman, and a howl arose from their ranks.

One burly fellow drew a knife and sprung toward Hecate, but not an inch did she give way. Indeed, one of her hands arose and swept for-

ward, and then the lyncher dropped his knife and clapped both hands to his eyes.

As he did so his cry of pain made her last movement plain—she had thrown something in his eyes.

Barranca Bill was not surprised, for he knew the Witch's way of old, and Helen abandoned her own vendetta out of surprise, but a fury ran through the lynchers which would be dangerous when it burst the bounds of their stupefaction.

"Oh! merciful Heaven! she has put out my eyes!" howled the man who had sampled Hecate's way.

The words were enough to break the spell, and the lynchers aroused together. Fierce words sounded from their lips, and then they hurled themselves on the Witch in a body.

Barranca Bill saw her staff arise in the air, like the black flag of a pirate, but he knew she must soon yield to the pressure.

What became of her he did not care, but, seeing Helen Neville in the midst of the mob, he sprung forward to save her; but with so many men seeking a victim it was not strange that he soon went down in a heap, helpless, and stunned.

Gentle John, who had thus far stood inactive, also perceived the peril of his *protegee*, but when he would have gone to her side the press of numbers kept him back.

Sooner than he had expected he saw Hecate overpowered and seized, and then the lynchers began to speak in a business way.

"Hang the demon!"

"String her up!"

"Get the rope ready!"

"Where is thar a tree?"

Beyond doubt they were in earnest, but as the nearest tree was a mile away, it was clear they would have to rely on some other article from which to suspend their prisoner.

Away they went, and Gentle John saw to his alarm that Helen was taken along with the rush.

"Hol' on, thar, hol' on!" he cried. "Pay ther bill an' set 'em up ag'in. I want ther gal."

He made a bold push for his, *protegee* followed by Bad Lung, who had uncovered his ten-pin like a warrior bold, but who could not change his chubby face into a savage expression.

Gentle John failed in his grand object, however, for the men of Ramrod Bar, mistaking his motive, promptly assailed him in concert and he was left by the wayside as insensible as was Barranca Bill.

Bad Lung had wisely kept clear of danger, and he paused by the form of his employer and looked at his set face with expanded eyes.

"All down but nine!" he mournfully observed. "'Melican man hit durnee hard; Gentle Johnee lay down with broken headee. Me set him up ag'in."

Into his pocket the heathen thrust his hand, and when it came out again a black flask was dimly visible.

He knelt by John's side, raised his head and began to tip the flask, but at that moment the fact that it was very nearly empty impressed him forcibly.

"Allee down but ninee!" he remarked, and then the bottom of the flask arose and the liquor began to trickle down his own throat.

Yet Bad Lung was not very selfish, and when he had fairly sampled the stuff, he proceeded to pour the rest into Gentle John's mouth.

At the same time, and only a few feet away, Hans Vedder was working over Barranca Bill, and the scene was thus made a novel one.

In the mean while, the lynchers were dragging old Hecate away, anxiously looking for a place where they could give her the noose of the rope. Their injured companion was led by two men, and he began to suspect that his eyes were not permanently injured, but the fighting blood of Ramrod Bar was up and they meant business.

Hecate was not an amiable prisoner; she had struck and scratched until her arms were firmly pinioned, and then her lively tongue poured out a shocking stream of abuse.

Along with this mob Helen Neville was carried very much against her will, and she began to wonder what would be the end of it all.

The lynchers were not long in finding a building where matters were suitable for their purpose, and then Hecate was hustled forward, the noose placed over her neck, and the loose end, which dangled from the impromptu gibbet, seized by a dozen hands.

"Up with her!" cried Sam Soaper, shrilly. "Show her the way of Ramrod Bar. Pull hard!"

CHAPTER VII.

DADDY GRAY GETS A RAY OF LIGHT.

MR. CEPHAS BROWN was in trouble of more than ordinary caliber when he was thus assailed by the man with the gray beard. During his career as the great man of Comet Camp no one had dared lift a hand against him, and as he had kept pretty closely within the pale of the law he had no fears of the lynchers under Jack Joyce when they invaded his house.

The eccentric conduct of the gray-bearded man had amused, rather than alarmed, him, at first, but when the old man sprung forward

and bore him to the floor, he could not doubt but that he was in the clutch of a madman.

Wild fear seized upon the politician, for those long, bony fingers seemed to possess immense strength, and he struggled in vain under the crushing knee.

A tragedy was averted, however.

Jack Joyce sprung forward, caught the old man by the collar and cast him on the floor.

"You durnation ole idjot!" he snapped, "what do you mean? Shoot me ef I ain't a mind ter bore ye with a forty-two caliber. You go back to Ramrod Bar an' put a plaster on your head."

Except for what he said, the lynchers treated the episode with indifference, knowing the old man as they did, but Mr. Brown, having arisen, stared at him in mingled surprise and apprehension.

Judged by his looks, he was not less than sixty-five years of age, though his once-muscular form still suggested considerable prowess in spite of the bend in his back; but his long hair and patriarchal beard were white as snow in places and everywhere well silvered.

His face was far from being ugly, coarse or repulsive, but, just then, Cephas had seen a terrible fire in the eyes which hovered under his shaggy brows like an Indian in ambush.

"First fall fur Jack Joyce," said one of the lynchers.

"Daddy Gray has got 'em bad," said another.

"Ther moonin' idjot ought ter be shot up," added a third.

"Oh! let ole Daddy alone; his spell is over," said Jack Joyce, carelessly.

The old man did indeed seem forgetful of his passion, or cowered, for he very slowly arose to a sitting position and rubbed his hand across his forehead as though to clear away a mental mist.

Vivian who had been temporarily alarmed for her father, now felt all her sympathies go forth to this old man, and she was about to speak when Luke Gridley touched her on the arm.

"Say the word, and I'll pitch him into the street," he observed.

"Do it if you dare!" the girl spitefully answered. "That poor old man is clearly mad—mentally disordered—and nobody shall harm him. As for you, sir, no one has requested you to remain."

A red flush crept into Luke's face. He had a hot temper, and the scornful manner of the girl cut him to the quick, but he crushed back the retort he was tempted to utter.

As for leaving, he was not yet ready.

Daddy Gray, after a brief pause, arose to his feet and then brushed the dust from his garments.

"You used me a little roughly, John," he said, looking at Joyce. "You are younger and clearer-headed than I, as you might remember, but I suppose I tried your patience too far.

"You tried ter come ther strangulation racket, ole man, an' we ain't in need of corpses. But, thar, thar, Daddy, it's all right on our part, an' I hopes as how I didn't hurt ye."

"Oh! not at all, John, not at all. Even if you had, I deserved it, for I laid my hands in violence on a fellow-man. Thank Heaven, John, you saved me from crime, and now I'll apologize to the gentleman."

Vivian, listening closely, was surprised at the language and manner of the old man. She had once known a man who claimed to be a dweller on Fifth avenue, in New York city, and his ways were not more polished and courtly than those of Daddy Gray.

The latter, at his last word, stepped toward Brown, evidently about to apologize, but as his gaze rested on the politician's face, a change appeared on his own—a wild, startled look—and he stopped short, hesitated, and then retreated to Joyce's side.

"I can't do it, John; I can't do it!" he muttered.

"Don't try then, Daddy; I reckon it are all right."

"It isn't all right," said Cephas, belligerently. "I am not to be set upon as by a wild beast, borne to the floor and strangled with impunity. I don't want to buck against the men of Ramrod Bar, but this man goes into our jail."

"Hol' on, jedge; hol' on. Don't be hard on Daddy. He is a pore ole man w'ot has lost his wits, an' he don't mean no harm. I'm a shooter, myself, an' I b'lieve in whoopin' 'em up, but I never knowed Daddy ter hurt a 'skeeter afore."

"What do you call him?"

"Daddy Gray."

"I never heard of him."

"He's an unfort'nate creetur', an' he's lost hisself. He's be'n at Ramrod Bar fur a year, but neither he nor nobody else knows his name. We call him Daddy Gray, 'cause he's ole an' white-bearded. He don't know whar he came from when he showed up at ther Bar, but he has an ijea he has be'n doin' ther mining-towns a good many year. Poor ole Daddy; he's lost his b'arin's altogether."

Jack Joyce was a hard man by reputation; a man of the revolver and knife, and a sort of leader in every lawless mob-gathering; but

many people have a grain of good nature under a rough exterior, and he looked at the old man with kindly eyes.

Cephas saw how the wind was blowing and was wise enough to temporize.

"I don't hold any grudge," he said, though I can't see why so mild a man should assail me."

Daddy Gray started eagerly forward.

"That is just what puzzles me," he said. "I can't understand it. When I look at you I am seized by an overpowering desire to kill you. My blood seems to turn to fire and my fingers twitch with a wild desire to fasten on your throat. Why is it? What have you done to me in the past?"

Brown started abruptly.

"What have I done to you? Nonsense, old man; your brain wanders. I have done nothing; I never saw you until to-night."

"I do not believe it!" cried Gray, abruptly. There is something in your face which brings back the past—that part of it which occurred before I lost myself. Tell me, do you know who I am?"

He put out his trembling hands, and his appearance was so pitiful that Vivian's heart was touched still more deeply, but Brown shook his head.

"I'm sorry for you, but you are on the wrong tack. I never saw or heard of you before. Mr. Joyce, it strikes me you take queer men when you go on the war-path, so I must request you to finish searching for this murderer and leave us alone."

Mr. Brown spoke blandly, and Jack Joyce recalled his wits and settled down to the search. The politician led the way, and after him followed the men of the Bar—all except Daddy Gray.

The latter remained in the hall, but he had become unconscious of all around him. He seemed to be making a great effort to recall the past which had somehow slipped away from him, but an occasional shake of his gray head showed how poor was his success.

Vivian had also remained in the hall, and, unconscious of the fact that Luke Gridley was also hovering near and watching with an evil smile, she went to the old man's side and laid her hand on his arm.

He looked up with a start, but his expression instantly became wild.

"You are troubled," said the girl gently.

"I am always troubled, child, and who would not be if they had lost their lives, themselves. Why, I don't even know who I am. The miners call me Daddy Gray, but that isn't my name. The real one has slipped away, somehow, just as one loses a diamond. The men say I am mad, and perhaps I am, to a certain degree, but I am sure I would be all right if some one would tell me who I am—who I was once."

The speaker's voice was inexpressibly mournful, and he brushed his hand across his forehead with the old gesture. There were dim shapes and shadows in his mind, but the chain of memory was broken and he lacked the power to weld the links.

"Can you remember nothing?"

"No; all is chaos. Yet, the sight of that man—he whom I assailed in my temporary madness—brought up something of the time when I was myself. I feel sure he has some time done me a wrong."

Daddy Gray spoke with more than ordinary emphasis, and Gridley, who had softly approached to listen, suddenly showed fresh interest.

"You are weak and tired, old man," he interrupted. "Come with me and I will give you food and a good bed. You shall rest like a lord, to-night."

Both Gray and Vivian turned upon him; the former with a frown, and the latter in more emphatic anger.

"Sir!" she cried, "I will tolerate your interference no longer. I feel sure you are not a friend, and the sooner you leave the house, the more you will please me. There is the door!"

Her words and manner stung Luke to a fury.

"I will not go!" he declared. "In this house I stay as long as I please, and as for you, my lady, if you fly too high I will yet bring you low in the dust."

"Beware!" she cried. "I know how to uphold my rights when I have occasion, and you will do well not to anger me too much."

He laughed mockingly.

"What can a woman do?"

"This!"

Even as she spoke the word she snatched a revolver from his belt and turned its muzzle upon him; but with a catlike movement he leaped forward and caught her wrist before she could raise the hammer.

"Drop it!" he hissed; "drop it, or, by my life, I will crush your hand!"

It was the act and threat of a coward, but help was at hand for Vivian.

With a bound like that of a panther, Daddy Gray leaped forward and dropped his hands on Gridley; then with a single effort he raised him as though he had been a child, bore him to the door and cast him out in the open air without ceremony.

This done, he turned to Vivian, the ferocious

look on his face giving place to one of gentleness.

"I think you will have no more trouble, miss," he quietly said.

"But, you—you— Beware that he does not do you harm."

"What matters it? Who would care for old Daddy Gray? I am like an old, rotten vessel; a useless hulk."

Tears entered Vivian's eyes, but at that moment the lynchers re-entered the hall, led by Jack Joyce, and, turning abruptly away, the old man mixed with the crowd.

Joyce, on his part, made an elaborate apology for disturbing the Honorable Mr. Brown, and then away went the lynchers and father and daughter were alone.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WEEPING WILLOWS.

SAM Soaper lacked a good deal of his being the worst man in Nevada, although he never repudiated the term "rough" when applied to himself, but when he got fairly in motion he was a bad man to fool with, even though the other party was a woman.

Thus, when he had escorted the Witch of the Weeping Willows under the impromptu gallows, he had not a solitary spark of compassion for her sex and gray hairs; Jim Peters was groaning dismally over his damaged eyes, and on Sam's own head was arising a bunch created by Hecate's staff; and the chief from Ramrod Bar could see no reason why the woman should not balance the books and go to another court by the gibbet line.

On her own part, the woman stood bound and helpless, the noose around her neck, but not even the quivering of an eyelid betrayed fear.

Soaper had given the decisive command and the Barites were about to hoist when a woman pushed through the crowd and threw herself with clasped hands at the feet of the chief lynch.

It was Helen Neville.

"Oh! do not harm her! Have mercy. Save her, save her!" she cried.

The men at the rope instinctively paused, and Soaper looked down at her who knelt at his feet. The interruption was not surprising, for few people are hung without an intercessor appearing in their behalf, but Mr. Samuel Soaper had never in his life had such a pretty girl kneel to him before.

He was dazzled by her beauty, and had he followed the voice of his heart he would have said:

"Arise, my queen; for your sake I'll pardon this woman, her brothers and sisters, and the rest of the family thrown in!"

Luckily for his future honors, he said nothing of the kind. Remembering that he was the chief of Ramrod Bar, and a sort of Judge Lynch, he managed to place pleasure inferior to duty.

"Sorry fur you, marm," he said, "but ther edict can't be busted. Ther durnation—beg yer pardon—ther owdacious critter hez put Jim Peters's eyes in ther dump an' up she goes a-hootin', beggin' yer pardon, marm."

"No, no; do not give the word. Remember she is a woman. Spare her, or, at the least, let the law deal with her."

"Ther law? Ha! ha! I reckon you are green in this part of Nevada. Right an' might is our only law, an' by them we boxes up ther deservin'."

"That is the doctrine of brutes, not of men, and not one of you has a bad face. I can read you better than you know, and I'll almost swear you would risk your lives for me."

"Every time!"

"Right you are!"

"Leave ther ole woman alone!"

"Hurrah fur ther gal!"

With admirable skill Miss Neville had touched a chord which vibrated well under her potent hand, and the battle was won before her strategy was fully developed.

Rude as they were, they had ample room in their hearts for so pretty a girl.

To add to the force of it all, Jim Peters came forward and took off his hat.

"I reckon you're right, boyees," he said, "an' thar is enough muscle left in my eyes so that I can see ther gal right plain."

"Bah!" interpolated Hecate, "the stuff was merely snuff; your eyes are not injured; but you may thank your stars I didn't throw vitriol instead."

The case had narrowed down to a peaceable point, and all would have been well had not other people taken part in the drama.

It will be remembered that Hecate was the keeper of the so-called hotel of the Weeping Willows; a place really the refuge of every criminal along the range, and the head-quarters of the toughs of Comet Camp; and as the old woman was a friend to all, in her way, it was not strange they liked her well.

To the law-abiding element she might be "the Witch," but to them she was "the Queen," and the cut-throats of the town were always ready to back her.

Consequently, when news reached the Weeping Willows that she was in trouble, the roughs

turned out in a body and charged down toward the men from the Bar, and the shadow of trouble, which had thus far been averted by the wisest citizens, began to loom darkly again.

Just at the moment when all seemed sure to end well, there was a tremendous uproar from the outskirts of the crowd; a union of shouts, war-whoops, and other strange sounds; and then the roughs hurried themselves forward in a solid body, knife and revolver well advanced.

Helen Neville stood appalled at what followed. The reports of revolvers and the fierce oaths of the rival bands were added to the opening confusion as the lynchers met their foes bravely, and the din became sickening.

One or two bullets whistled past the young woman, but she lacked the power to flee. Separated from Gentle John, she had not a friend upon whom she could rely, and Comet Camp was to her a strange place.

She knew not in which way lay her hotel.

Old Hecate, however, was more practical in her way. Usually, she would have sprung into the thick of the fray, using her staff as a club, and urging on her followers; but she had fixed her evil eyes on Helen, and she was not long in seeking the richer game.

Assuming a feebleness she was far from feeling, she hobbled to Helen's side.

"You have saved my life," she purred, in tones she could well assume when necessity demanded, "and for that I pray that unnumbered blessings may be yours. If we stay here, however, we shall both be killed."

"In heaven's name, take me away," gasped Helen, whose bravery had all vanished.

"Come with me, dear lady, and I will save you," old Hecate soothingly said; and then, side by side, they hastened away from the battling men.

The Witch had no doubts as to the ability of her followers to worst the men of Ramrod Bar, so she devoted all her attention to the project she had formed, and rapidly conducted her prey toward the Weeping Willows.

As the sounds of strife grew fainter, Helen's composure began to reassert its sway.

"Are we near the hotel called the Cosey Corral?" she suddenly asked.

"Going right toward it, my dear," Hecate replied, unmindful of the fact that the Cosey Corral was at their backs.

"Thank Heaven! If I once arrive there, I will never go out in Comet Camp by night again."

"You are a stranger here, I think."

"I came on the afternoon stage."

"Didn't your friends meet you?"

"My friends? I haven't one in the world."

Hecate's eyes glistened.

"Don't you know any one in Comet Camp?"

"Not a soul."

"Then why are you here?"

In her eagerness the Witch had asked the question too abruptly, and Helen's hesitation showed her the fact.

"I dare say you came about that runaway husband of yours," she added.

The young woman's thoughts returned to the ruling passion.

"Madam," she cried, "who is that man? He claimed that his name was Lincoln, but I could swear he is my—"

"Your husband?"

"Yes. Donald Lander, my husband."

"Well, my dear, you saw him and you ought to know. He is superintendent of a mine here, and everybody bows at his feet. Men call him Barranca Bill. Yet, my dear, almost every man in the West lives under a false name."

"I had no idea how horrible matters were until to-night. I heard that Donald had been seen at Comet Camp and thought I had the strength to follow him around the world, but it is all gone now, all gone. Oh! I am like a child in this danger!"

Her plaintive manner would have touched the heart of many a vile rascal, but only the darkness concealed the triumph on Hecate's face.

To her, innocence was a worthless bauble; she aspired to possess this dainty young woman from the East, and with the walls of the infamous Weeping Willows before her, she felt that the deed was done.

"Never you mind, my dearie; I'll see you safe through all your troubles. Here, enter at this door."

Helen looked in new fear at the repulsive edifice in front of her.

"What place is this?" she asked.

"Why, it's the Cosey Corral. I've taken you to the rear so that no one will see how late at night you are out. Just go in, and we will creep up through the kitchen."

The bait worked and in the darkness the building even began to look like the Cosey Corral; so Helen hesitated no longer but passed through.

"Take my hand, dearie," cooed the woman. "I know every foot of the way, and I'll lead you straight to your room."

With the closing of the door, Helen Neville's fate seemed sealed; well might it be said that those who entered there left hope behind; but the Witch led on from room to room until at last she had her prey in the web.

"Stand here a moment," she said, in a tone less dovelike, "and I'll strike a light. The Corral is still and dark, but it is safer than the street."

Helen obeyed the direction, and the match was soon scratched, which was to show the extent of the deception practiced upon her.

CHAPTER IX.

LUKE GRIDLEY DEFINES HIS POSITION.

THE match assumed its full strength with annoying slowness, but all too soon for Helen's peace of mind its flame was communicated to a lamp. A respectably bright light flared up and the girl glanced about the room.

Her first glance brought no consolation. The Cosey Corral was but a rude hotel, but everything was as neat as labor could make it, while on the floor and walls of the wretched room to which she had been lured was a quantity of dirt which quickened her wits.

She turned abruptly on Hecate.

"This is not the Cosey Corral!" she declared, anger and fear struggling for the mastery.

"No, dearie, it isn't," the woman frankly admitted, "but it is a heap safer place. The Corral is in the hands of the mob, and I have heard such stories of their cruelties that I dared not tell you outside for fear you would sink to the earth in a swoon. Bear up, my poor child; be brave, for you are safe."

The words were plausible enough, and under some circumstances Helen might have been deceived, but the nature of the Witch was written on her evil face, and this, taken with the fact that her dupe's wits were fast developing, made her falsehood like a vail of gauze.

"I do not believe you!" cried Helen. "You are deceiving me; you have decoyed me here for some dark purpose. Oh! woman, what do you call yourself that you should thus betray a sister in her hour of adversity?"

It was an appeal of unconscious power, but no power could touch the heart of the mistress of the Weeping Willows.

"Now, dearie," she began, whiningly; but Helen again drew her revolver and presented it with an unwavering hand.

"Quick!" she cried; "lead the way from this den or I will shoot!"

Hecate realized her danger, but her pulse did not quicken one iota. Skilled in cunning, she felt able to outwit this young woman from the East.

"So be it, then," she said, with a sigh, "but do not blame me if you fall into the hands of the mob. Come!"

Helen promptly followed her to the door, but no sooner had Hecate passed the threshold than she wheeled and slammed the door together, while at the same moment her nimble fingers turned the key.

She had scarcely done so when there was a beating on the inner side, but the old Witch had seen the room tested before, and with merely a grim smile she left the place and moved toward another part of her den.

Entering a larger room she saw a young man seated at a table, a black flask beside him, his heels well elevated and a morose scowl on his face, but we need not pause to describe him when we say that he was Luke Gridley.

"Well, where have you been?" he crustily asked.

"Away on business," Hecate calmly answered, as she set down her light. "Have you waited long?"

"Well, no; can't say I have."

"You don't look happy, and your clothes are dust-covered. Did Cephas Brown throw you into the street?"

"No; but since you are so clever at reading signs, I'll admit that some one else did."

"Who?"

"A man of Ramrod Bar," replied Luke, with a deeper scowl. "Let that part pass, for one of these fine days I'll have his life for it. I drew my six-shooter then, mad for blood, but I remembered our great work and decided to run no risk of getting into trouble."

"You did wisely. Well, what of Cephas Brown?"

"He defied me."

"He did?"

"Yes."

Hecate had been surprised, but the emotion soon passed.

"You did not play your cards well."

"I played 'em for all they were worth," growled Gridley, as he took another drink from the flask.

"And Brown defied you?"

"Yes. He swears he is not Roderic Raymond and denies that he was ever in Tennessee."

"That was folly."

"Maybe you can convince him that 'twas."

"Bah! he knew it well, or doubted our ability to prove it. More likely, he seeks to gain time."

"Well, he flew high and fast and aired his English without regard for my feelings. Somehow, he don't cotton to me for a son, and the sublime Miss Vivian is just as bad! Zounds! if she wasn't my half-sister I'd marry her or die! Her beauty set me wild, and her scorn maddened me."

"She scorned you?"

"Yes."

"Let her beware!" cried Hecate, striking the table with her withered hands. "Those of my blood don't bear scorn with impunity, and she had best be respectful to her father's son. But, tell me all about the affair."

Gridley obeyed, and as he talked, his ill-favored face was a map of his heart; but through all Hecate's face remained impassive.

They made a forbidding pair—the evil, low-browed young man and the hardened old woman.

"So my lord flies high!" muttered the witch, at the end. "Well, so be it, but we will bend his proud neck. He can't hold his own when all the cards are in our hands. He will be a fool to try it. But this Daddy Gray—what notion is running in his old head? He should be seen and pumped."

"I intended that, but our row ends the matter, of course. It's a knife and revolver matter between us, and I'll have his life before a week. I swear—"

"No, you don't. Hold your temper, at least for a while. I intend to see this Daddy Gray and question him. Beyond a doubt he knew Brown in the days when he had a brain; he says he believes he received some injury from the man; and if he has an iota of reason left, I'll draw it out of him. Trust me."

"Have your own way," snarled Luke.

"As for Vivian, you are an idiot to rave about her, since she is your sister. Speaking of women, I have a bird up-stairs who puts all the Comet Camp females in the shade."

"Who?"

Hecate described the events of the evening which ended in the capture of Helen Neville.

"Let me see your bird," said Gridley.

"No," said the witch, grimly; "I'll guard her like the apple of my eye. She is my prisoner, and I intend to keep her, but not a man shall lay hand upon her, whatever his motive."

"Then why have you caught her?"

The woman indulged in a smile which made her face look more hideous than ever.

"To keep up the reputation of the Weeping Willows. One young female like her will do more than every card lay-out in the West to please my patrons. How? Well, I haven't settled the precise fashion. Perhaps she will sit at a card table and represent the bank, maybe she will mix drinks behind the bar, or, perhaps, she will merely sing to amuse our gallants."

"If she is as beautiful as you say, they will take her away by force."

"Let them try it!" snapped the Witch. "It will be a sad day for the man who tries it. I'll shoot him like a dog. Once more I say not a man shall lay even the tip of his finger upon her. If they are kept at a distance their admiration will last, and my pretty bird will make me rich. Oh! I'll defend her with my last drop of blood, so long as she is useful, and you know the worst rough in Nevada can't stand before me."

Hecate stretched out her arms. They were without flesh and discolored, but muscle of which many a man might well be proud lurked along their length.

"I admit that your plan is good," said Luke, upon whom this dumb show fell without force, "but how will you control this bonanza princess?"

"How?"

"Yes."

Hecate chuckled in her unmusical fashion.

"You have been a week in Comet Camp, and during that time you have seen me bend strong men to my will—rough, fearless fellows of the knife and revolver, claimants to the title of 'chief' and all that sort of thing. Will I, then, fail on a puny girl?"

Gridley shrugged his shoulders.

"I reckon you will manage her somehow, but there is still another flaw. If she is as refined as you claim, it is not likely she will tamely settle down to the companionship of the lambs of your ranch. Once let her get word to the dandy element of the town and they will clear you out."

"Let 'em try it!" snapped the Witch. "It will be a bad day for them when they molest the Weeping Willows. Boy, you don't know me yet. But, let it drop; I'll look out for my bird, and do you press your work with Cephas Brown."

"Never fear; I'll bring the old fellow to time or raise a riot. I'm going in to share his shekels. Here am I, his oldest child, kicking around like a beggar, while he and the dainty Vivian roll in wealth. Zounds! do you think I'll bear that? No; my lordly father must divide his spoils."

"He has an iron will."

"So have I, and I've learned how to use it by knocking around the wide West."

"Don't be too confident. Cephas may employ an assassin."

"I've seen such trash before."

Gridley's ill-humor had vanished under the magnetic influence of the black flask, and with his feet on the table he smiled blandly on Hecate.

She, with her tangled hair, repulsive face

and shapeless form, looked like a veritable witch, and in the pair Vice ruled supreme. Where was hope for Helen Neville?

CHAPTER X.

THE LYNCHERS DEPART.

THE blow which prostrated Barranca Bill had been severe only to the degree of stunning him; no injury had been given the skull, and in a short time consciousness returned.

Hans Vedder had worked over him with unusual zeal, and his recovery gave the fat man great pleasure.

"Where is the mob?" demanded the superintendent, coming down to business at once.

"I knows nottings apout dem, for we are all alons mit ourselves an'dose udder mans."

Hans pointed to where, a few feet away, Bad Lung was nursing Gentle John, and as Bill strode to the spot, anxious to lose no time, the man of the bowling-alley sat upright.

"Whar am I, Bad Lung?" the latter asked.

"Hev you see'd a creetur' o' my size anywhar' round hyar?"

"Me thinkee you here alle time," the Celestial replied. "Melican man hitee you over de headee, but Bad Lung setee 'em up ag'in."

"All down but nine," added John, feeling of his head. "I wrastled with an'arthquake, an' got laid out. Hyar, give us yer hand; set 'em up ag'in."

He arose to his feet just as Barranca Bill arrived.

"I think I've seen you before," said the latter.

"You kin now see me sence."

"What is your name?"

"Gentle John—only one J."

"You were with the young woman?"

"Yas; I had a charge ter keep, but it got away from me. They are all down but nine."

"Who is she?"

"Cordin' ter ther statistics, a young female from the East. She arroved ter-day on ther stage, tuk supper, an'sallied forth ter see Mr. Cephas Brown, from whom she wanted information o' a runaway husband o' her'n. He cast off ther grappin'-irons in a way you may be able to understand."

"Softly, my gentle friend. I allowed the girl to give me a bad name, but I'll be shot if any man can tread on my toes in such a fashion. I am not this Donald Lander of whom she speaks, and I never saw her until to-night. I'll swear to it."

Gentle John looked keenly at his companion.

"I b'lieve you, pard, an' we'll set 'em up ag'in an' play a straighter game."

"I've been accused of a crime," resumed Barranca Bill, "and now I'm going to see the girl through, and vindicate myself. If you are with me, say so, and we'll back the girl right along, and find this Donald Lander. I rather cotton to the girl, and the man who deserted her must have been to blame. Are we in the game together?"

"Ter ther death," said John, putting out his hand.

"Me takee hand in gamee, alle samee," said Bad Lung, placing his chubby fingers on theirs.

"Oh! you go along; you ain't good for nothin', nohow," observed Gentle John.

"Me setee 'em up fur 'Melican man."

"Hark!" said Bill, suddenly, "there is fightin' over yonder. Miss Neville may be in danger. Follow me!"

He darted away, with John and Bad Lung at his heels, but Hans Vedder, after a wise shake of his head, waddled back into the house.

The strife heard by Barranca Bill was the "meet" of the lynchers and the Weeping Willows roughs, but the former were soon re-enforced by the division under Jack Joyce, and, beaten at every point, the roughs fell back and, as soon as was possible, made their way to old Hecate's den.

Consequently, when Bill and his friends arrived, they found a peaceful consultation in progress, and when Sam Soaper had given the opinion that Paul Pindar was not in the village, but had for the time escaped them, it was voted to return to Ramrod Bar without delay.

Barranca Bill took the lyncher chief aside:

"Who is this Paul Pindar, and what his crime?" he asked.

"He's a cut-throat an' sneak. He come inter ther Bar, a few weeks ago, with a b'iled shirt an' other fixin's ter match, an' set up fur a sport. He slung ther keerdts like an angel, but it warn't long afore the boyees dropped ter ther racket that he didn't play a squar' game. We orter warned him out o' town, but we waited fur proof, an' when it come we got a deluge. Yesterday, Pindar played with ther Storm brothers—

Square Rob an' Honest George, we called 'em, 'cause they was white from their boot-heels up. Wal they ketched Pindar cheatin' an' tolle him so, an' that raised a row. What did ther b'iled-shirt varmint do? Ther Stormses was with ther hands above ther board, but Pindar slung his six an' bored 'em both in cold blood, an' they with no weepings drawed. Square Rob got it right through ther heart an' went up ther flume, an' Honest George tuk in a pill which nigh about turned up his toes. They was ther squarest

men in ther Bar, an' that's why we tuk after ther b'iled-shirt sport."

"Who witnessed the affair?"

"Ther three was alone."

"How do you know that the brothers did not draw?"

"Honest George said they didn't."

"Then it is merely one man's word against another."

"Ain't that enough?"

"Is Paul Pindar entitled to no credence?"

"To which?"

"Is he unworthy of belief?"

"O' course, he ain't worthy on't. Honest George never tolle a lie in his life, an' who would b'lieve a gambler an' cheat?"

Barranca Bill winced for it was hard to tamely hear such words applied to his brother, but he realized that it might be dangerous to both to champion his cause. Lacking any knowledge of the Storm brothers, he had no doubt but what they were in the wrong; surely the brother with whom he had played in his childhood could not be either a professional gambler or assassin.

He let the matter drop where it was, and then Sam Soaper and Jack Joyce formed their army and marched out of town. They had good cause to bless their luck that no general uprising had resulted from their invasion; if the better class had joined bands with the Weeping Willow roughs, there would have been mourning at Ramrod Bar when the lynchers reached home.

Barranca Bill and Gentle John proceeded to look for Helen Neville, but she was nowhere to be found. She had not returned to the Cosey Corral, and when Bill remembered how Hecate had espoused her cause, he gained an uncomfortable suspicion.

Accompanied by the bowling-alley pair, he went to the Weeping Willows. The place was dark and silent. He pounded at the door, but no answer came and the work was finally abandoned.

The night was half gone, and, bidding Gentle John adieu, the superintendent returned to his own house.

He did not think of retiring at once, but went to the place where Horace Lincoln, alias Paul Pindar, had been secreted, and the brothers were soon seated together.

Horace had had time to recover his usual boldness since the lynchers left the house, and when he heard of their return to Ramrod Bar he became wholly at his ease.

"It was a close call, but your aid pulled me through," he said.

"How did the trouble begin?"

"Well, I was laying around the Bar as a sight-seer, and yesterday—it's past midnight, ain't it?—I allowed two desperadoes to draw me into a game of cards. It was my first trial for money—and my last—but I learned the art in the East and actually began to win from them. Pretty soon there was a howl on their part and they accused me of cheating.

"I tumbled to their game right away; they thought that, as I was a stranger in the West, they could bluff me and scare me into refunding the money. Had I done so, all would have been well, but the Lincoln pluck arose and I asserted my rights. Then both drew their revolvers and, seeing my danger, I made a break for the door.

"Another moment and I fell headlong over a chair, but the mishap saved my life. One of the two had fired, and the bullet, whizzing over me as I fell, went home in the body of the second ruffian. That's how he died."

"But two were shot. What of the second?" asked Barranca Bill.

"That was my work, but it was done to save my life," said Horace, earnestly. "When the fellow saw what he had done, he uttered a roar of rage and leveled his revolver again. I had regained my feet and drawn my own Smith and Wesson, for I had no desire to be killed, and when I saw my danger I fired. Down went the man, severely, but not fatally, shot, and then in poured the miners. What was the result? Honest George, as they called the scoundrel I shot, told his story, and when he said I killed his brother he was believed. I was a stranger; he, a citizen."

"It was hard luck," said Bill, sympathetically.

Horace then described the fury of the mob and how he was pursued to Comet Camp. He had entered a house to throw himself on the mercy of the inmates, little suspecting he would thus meet his own brother.

"I'm out of the crush now," he added, cheerfully, "and I'll take care that the lynchers don't get me."

"I think it will be advisable for you to remain with me for a time," added William. "Sam Soaper has sent men to Yellow City, Bullion Flat and The Silver Ship, and you would find hard work to get through. True, you could hide in the mountains, but where could you get food?"

"I reckon you are right, and I'll accept your offer, William. No one will think of looking for me here."

"Right, for I have a flourishing local reputa-

tion, so much so that the boys wanted to run me for the Legislature against the Honorable Mr. Brown. Ha! ha! I wouldn't stand, however, for politics and I could never agree. When I take a swim I want clean water."

"When the Ramrod Bar men wanted to run me, last evening, I didn't hesitate, but run," said Horace, grimly.

"They called you Paul Pindar. How was that?"

"I was idiot enough to assume a false name for my Western tour. Idiot! Well, I don't know; if I am a branded murderer perhaps it's just as well my real name is unknown."

Conversation having arrived at this point, Barranca Bill asked further questions regarding the old home, and the matter brought back the past vividly.

The elder Lincoln had not been a wise man, and when he put a step-mother over his young sons he had made no remonstrance when she took a strong fancy to Horace and as deep a dislike—nay, hatred—for William, and the latter's life was made miserable.

Sensitive, proud and brave by nature, he ran away from home at fourteen, and from that time heard no more from the family until he met Horace as related.

Father and step-mother were numbered with the dead, and Horace, with a little money in his hands was making a tour of the West—such was his story.

Toward his twin brother William had never felt any resentment, though Horace's nature had been peevish and selfish in the old days, and the honest superintendent felt all his sympathy go out to one who was his only relative.

Their wonderful resemblance—as strong in manhood as in childhood—seemed but another tie.

CHAPTER XI.

BARRANCA BILL MAKES TWO VISITS.

THE eventful night drew toward the end without further incidents worthy of mention, but that peace to which we referred on opening our story had departed from the minds of more than one resident of Comet Camp.

The Honorable Mr. Brown, at whose feet men had bowed for so long, was disturbed by Luke Gridley's claim. Brown had refused to stand up and be counted as the father of the low-browed claimant, but he read mettle in every line of the young rascal's face, and had no doubt but what he would make matters unpleasant.

Helen Neville, who had thus been introduced to the ways of Western life, was in the hands of Hecate, and we need not lay stress on her peril.

Barranca Bill had been drawn into a net which might make trouble for him. Harboring branded criminals is never safe work, and where Judge Lynch rules, it is positively dangerous.

Lastly, Vivian Brown, Gentle John and others had been drawn into the game, and it was only fair to admit that Comet Camp might see lively times before many days.

Barranca Bill did not retire until nearly morning, but, in spite of that, he was early astir.

A few words with Horace and Hans Vedder, and then he went out on the street.

The village was as quiet as ever. The lynchers had touched things lightly, despite their uproar, and as the best men of Comet Camp had kept out, only Hecate's followers had cause to grieve.

Barranca Bill went at once to Mr. Brown's, but the genial Kate informed him that the politician had already left the house.

While he was hesitating as to his next move, Miss Vivian made her appearance, and at her invitation he went into the sitting-room to await Brown's return.

As he did so, he was impressed by the fact that the young lady was remarkably good-looking. He had noticed the fact before, when they were introduced at a public meeting, but he was not a ladies' man, and, except for an occasional nod when they met, the acquaintance had gone no further.

We have before observed that Vivian made it a part of her creed, as a woman should when allied to a politician, to be very amiable with her father's guests; and that doubtless explains why she was so kind to Barranca Bill, but a close observer might have seen that she was more animated than usual.

An hour passed pleasantly.

The arrival of Mr. Brown interrupted their interview, and brought the visitor down to business. He questioned Brown, but, though very polite to a man he knew would be a powerful opponent if he saw fit to run for office, that gentleman denied any and all knowledge of Donald Lander and Helen Neville.

Barranca Bill did not doubt him, and after a brief delay he left the house and went to Gentle John's place of business.

"I'm right glad ter see yer, pard," said the latter. "Shall Bad Lung set 'em up an' we take a friendly game?"

"Have you forgotten our compact?"

"Ter see Miss Helen through ther mi'l?"

"Yes."

"No; ther idea are vividly in my mind, an' I'm ready fur ther war-path. What's ther objective p'int? Ther Weepin' Willers? Good! I'm with yer ter ther death. Bad Lung, stay byar, an' ef ary biped ambles in, use 'em well."

"Me setee 'em up," Bad Lung modestly replied.

"Right you be. Wal, I'm ready; lead on, pard."

Gentle John had thrust revolvers here and there in his garments until he was a sort of walking arsenal, but the precaution was necessary if one intended to call at the Weeping Willows.

At the end of ten minutes' walk the dingy form of Hecate's hotel arose before them. It was a good-sized affair for Comet Camp, and spread over in a sort of toad-fashion, but the dullest observer could not but see something forbidding about it.

"I need not ask if you are prepared for business, after seeing you absorb half a dozen sixes," observed Barranca Bill.

"Right you be. Old Hecate has a way which is contagious, an' ther chances be we shall raise a riot. Ef I get bowled out o' ther game so bad I can't be set up ag'in, I hopes you'll carve my name on a slab with only one J. Make et 'Gentle John; he got knocked off his pins while treadin' ther path o' duty. Ther game is ended."

"I'll remember your wishes, though I trust you'll keep on your pins. Here goes!"

He rapped on the door, once, twice, thrice. Until the last call the Weeping Willows had seemed like a tomb, but the door suddenly opened and Hecate stood before them.

She dropped a courtesy which seemed a mockery, and then stepped back a pace.

"I am your most humble and obedient servant, sir," she purred. "Will the noble gentleman please enter?"

Barranca Bill was surprised. The Witch had never kept open house, like a regular hotel, and it was well known that only thieves and those they could pluck were ever freely admitted.

"Why, then, this sudden civility if she had anything to conceal?"

Both applicants suspected a trap, with Hecate's roughs in ambush, but, with his hand on his revolver, Barranca Bill pushed inside.

The ball was sufficiently lighted to show that no one was laying in wait for them there.

Hecate closed the door softly.

"What can I do for the noble gentlemen?" she then asked, in her tigress-like purr. "I have the best drinks in Nevada, and I'll be proud to serve you."

"We don't want 'em set up," Gentle John muttered in a subdued voice, while Bill more distinctly said:

"We have called to see Miss Neville."

"To—see—Miss—Neville?" repeated Hecate, very slowly. "Why, there isn't any Miss Neville here. I am the only woman about the hotel."

"I refer to the young woman who came here with you last night."

The Witch held up her hands in horror.

"A woman at the Weeping Willows? Impossible, sir! Knowing the sex as I do, I would not allow one in my house under any condition. Some one has misinformed you; no woman came here with me last night or at any other time."

Hecate was playing a bold game. If Helen had really been seen to enter the house, the denial would make a bad matter worse; but the cunning old woman believed her visitor was trying a bluff game, and met him accordingly.

"Enough of this," said Barranca Bill sharply. "I refer to the young woman who, last night, claimed me as one Donald Lander—you have not forgotten that little episode in which you figured as a defender of downtrodden innocence, or some such rubbish. Very well, after she left the vicinity of the mob, she came to this house with you."

"No, no, no!" cried Hecate, again raising her hands.

Gentle John moved one foot as though he longed to cut a pigeon-wing.

"All down but nine," he commented.

"Dare you allow me to search your house?" continued Barranca Bill.

"Why, certainly, my noble gentleman; and more than that, I shall be deeply honored. 'Tis seldom one like you, sir, condescends to visit the Weeping Willows."

She dropped another courtesy, and Bill began to feel helpless. That she was mocking him he could not doubt, for her reputation overcame her present assumption of innocence; but the fact also indicated that she had removed Helen, if she had really been there, or had a trap awaiting her callers.

Her coolness rather pleased Gentle John, who made a remark to the effect that the pins were all down.

The superintendent tersely directed her to lead the way, and the search began.

Without hesitation Hecate threw open door after door until, at the end of half an hour, every room except one had been searched. Of Miss Neville no trace had been found.

"This is my reading-room," said Hecate, pausing before the last door, "and my boarders are inside. I shall be proud to introduce you."

Barranca Bill glanced at Gentle John. If the patrons of the Weeping Willow were really inside, they would confront the worst men in Nevada by entering, and it might be death for them both.

His ally did not hesitate.

"You first; I foller," he tersely said.

Then Hecate flung open the door, entered, and at her heels came the pards.

They were in the presence of the lambs of the hotel.

In a room of considerable size, with a bar at one side and a good quantity of tables and benches, a score of men were seated in noisy devotion to the painted pasteboards and the seductive bottle.

Men who were monuments of dirt and rags; men whose brutality of expression was increased by the scars of many an affray; men who were the peers of the worst "toughs" beyond the Mississippi and the hardest characters in all Nevada.

They were Hecate's "boarders."

Accustomed as Barranca Bill was to all classes of society, such a collection of repulsive scoundrels was a little more than he could coolly bear, and he expected to see them spring up as one man and seize their weapons; but, after one glance, they resumed their occupations.

"They expected this visit," thought Bill.

"Look, most noble gentlemen," continued Hecate, "and see if you recognize your young lady. Did she have broad shoulders and a beard a foot long?"

Her sarcasm was irritating in the extreme, but Barranca Bill remained cool.

Without replying, he glanced keenly about the room. Standing where he did, he could see behind the bar, and it was very evident that no one was secreted in that locality.

Where, then, was Helen Neville?

CHAPTER XII.

DADDY GRAY WANTS A NEW HEAD.

BARRANCA BILL stood gnawing his mustache, reluctant to abandon the search, yet convinced that it was useless, while Gentle John stealing a side-glance at Hecate saw her eyes glisten with satisfaction.

"Ther blamed old catamount ez a-playin' ther roots on us," he thought; "but I'll be durned ef I kin head her off. Ef Bill kin do it, all right; ef not, she rakes ther board. Ther pins are all down in my alley."

While Bill hesitated, one of the card-players suddenly arose, scattering the pictured pasteboards in all directions, and moved toward the party with long strides.

Neither of the visitors failed to notice his movements, for the Lambs needed watching at all times, and when he pulled out a gleaming Smith & Wesson the scent of battle arose in the air.

"He's arter you, pard," said Gentle John.

Barranca Bill drew his own revolver with a jerk, but at that moment the Witch's staff sent her follower's weapon flying across the room.

She had pushed between the two and used her stick with remarkable celerity.

"Hands up!" she cried, shrilly. "The first man who shows fight gets a broken head."

Every one of the Lambs had leaped up, and Gentle John had drawn a pair of sixes, but under the spell of Hecate's voice the impending storm paused in its course and dead silence reigned for a moment in the room.

"I'll shoot the first man that makes a hostile move," resumed Hecate, glaring about her. "How many times must I say there shall be no fighting in my house? If an idiot is sick of life, let him say so and I'll send him over the range!"

In all his life Barranca Bill had never seen such a degree of influence. Those rough scoundrels whose creed was to fight and kill stood mute in the presence of the old woman, and, what was more, not a murmur arose.

"You, Abe Neal," she resumed, turning to him who would have broken the peace, "what do you mean by such idiocy?"

"Pile et on," was the sulky reply, "lay down ther law while you hold ther camp, but ef I meet a sartin man outside, one on us goes up ther flume. I mean him!"

He leveled one finger at Barranca Bill.

"Perhaps I can accommodate you, some day," returned the latter, promptly, "but it might clear away the mist a bit if you would tell us why you thirst for gore."

"Oh! you're innocent, you are, Ben Warren," sneered the rough, "but you mustn't think I don't know you."

"So I'm Ben Warren, am I?"

"Yes. Bah! do you think I will ever forget ye? I will when I bore you through the heart, not before."

"Perhaps you'll explain why you hate me?"

"You bet, I will. Go to Californy an' ask ef Steve Tyler served five years in prison. That's me, an' I don't deny that I was in ther game that put me there, but I kin safely say a year

would have settled ther debt ef my pard, Ben Warren, hadn't turned ag'in me an' swore ter lies. That's you, you hound, an' I'll hev your life fur it!"

"When was this?"

"Jest six years ago."

"I was in Texas, at that time, and I can prove it. You are barking up the wrong tree, my festive friend, for I am not Benjamin, at all, nor was I ever your pard. Cut, and deal again."

"Set 'em up on t'other alley," added Gentle John.

"You're a liar!" shouted Abe Neal. "You can't fool me. Bah! hate never makes a miss."

"You go and sit down," interrupted Hecate. "I won't have quarreling here, and if you don't hold your tongue, I'll clear you out of the hotel. You hear me, don't you?"

"I hear you," growled Neal, "and I'll postpone ther killin', but, my gay Ben, you'll hear from me ag'in. I never forgot a wrong, an' I'll carve more off'm your life than you lied out o' mine. When we meet ag'in, it's war ter ther death."

With an evil scowl he slouched back to his seat and the "Lambs" settled into position, but Hecate failed to recover her old blandness.

"Well, are you ready to get out of this?" she surlily asked.

"Yes," said Barranca Bill, calmly. "Throw open the cage door and we'll leave your menagerie alone."

Preceded by Gentle John, he walked backward through the door, and in less than a minute the outer one clanged behind them.

Hecate had failed to regain her fluency of speech, and they went without parting words; nor did the two men speak until the Weeping Willows was a hundred yards behind.

"We are foiled," the superintendent abruptly said.

"Right you are. What d'ye make out?" asked Gentle John.

"Well, it may be absurd, but it is my fixed opinion that the Witch has caught Miss Neville, and, foreseeing our visit, has in some way disposed of her. Perhaps she has a secret room about the house, or she may be outside, somewhere. I am now going to sift the matter to the bottom. I shall enlist Sheriff Sharpe and have him search the whole town. Girls like Helen Neville don't come and go like rough men, you know."

"Mebbe, she was tuk to Ramrod Bar."

"I doubt it. Sam Soaper is a rough fellow, but I don't take him for a villain."

"An' what o' ther galoot who called ye Ben Warren?"

"Now, you have me, John. Confound it, do I look like all the rascals in the world, or why do they turn up so brisk to claim me? I know nothing of this Abe Neal, and it's my opinion Hecate engineered the whole plot. Perhaps she thinks she can get me roped in for a law-breaker, but if any biped crowds me too hard, I shall make hair fly."

"Right you be! Them's my motto. Go light, ef you kin; ef not, set 'em up ag'in an' bowl ther alley clean."

Barranca Bill went at once to the office of Sheriff Sharpe, who promised to search carefully for Miss Neville, and then, bidding Gentle John good-day, returned to his own house.

Once there he was informed by Hans that a caller was awaiting him in the inner room, and going there at once he saw an aged, gray-bearded man engaged in reading a copy of Shakespeare—a book which, in itself, formed the whole of Lincoln's library.

He paused, a little mystified by the old man, who united with a miner's dress the look of a patriarch and a taste above the Nevada average; but the reader suddenly perceived him, laid aside his book, arose and bowed with stately dignity.

"I trust you will pardon me for claiming your time, sir," he politely said, "but I called—Good gracious! it's Paul Pindar!"

For the first time the old man had fairly raised his eyes, and his exclamation was accompanied by a look of astonishment.

"Do you come from Ramrod Bar?" irritably asked Barranca Bill.

"Yes."

"Then, for Heaven's sake, sing a new song; I'm tired of the old one. No; it is not Paul Pindar, old man, and I'd thank you to grapple with the fact. My name is William Lincoln. What can I do for you?"

"Ah! ah! I remember hearing the l.ysmention the resemblance now, but it is so wonderful I am amazed. I trust you will overlook 't, Mr. Lincoln."

The speaker's manner was so earnest that Barranca Bill lost all his ill feeling, and he said as much as he sat down near the old man.

"Have you come as a messenger from the men of Ramrod Bar?" he asked.

"No, no; I came—a—on private business. I don't suppose you know me, Mr. Lincoln?"

"Can't say I do."

"That is not strange, for I don't know myself. You may think me jesting, sir, but I don't even know my own name."

"Indeed!"

Barranca Bill looked at him sharply. There was nothing, unless we except a look of melancholy, to suggest mental disorder; he looked more like a benevolent old gentleman of means, so far as his face went; but the superintendent clearly saw that something was wrong.

"I belong at Ramrod Bar, and the boys call me Daddy Gray, but that's because my hair and beard suggested the name. I appeared there some months ago, but I couldn't tell where I came from nor who I was. Singular, wasn't it?"

"You had met with some accident, doubtless."

"Something must have happened sometime to so overturn my reason, but I believe it was many years ago, perhaps a score. I have an idea I have been roving aimlessly about the West for a long time, for visions of other camps fit across my darkened intellect like the scenes of a panorama; but when I try to grasp them, they slide away, slide away!"

The mournful, gentle air of the old man deeply interested Barranca Bill; the idea of a lost life, a lost identity, was inexpressibly touching.

"You should seek medical advice," he said.

"That's just why I came to you," said Daddy Gray, brightening.

"To me?"

"Yes."

"I am not a doctor."

"I have heard you are as good as one."

"Oh! I have some knowledge of medicine, and in my way can set an arm or leg, if the fracture is not too complicated, but it is only the rudiments of the business which I have mastered."

"Can you make a new head?"

"A new head?" echoed Bill.

"Yes."

"No; I don't think I can. That's away up in the king-row, clean out of sight of the rudiments. Do you want a new one?"

"Either that, or to have the old one repaired. I don't like the everlasting buzzing in bere."

Daddy Gray tapped his head, and Barranca Bill had become so interested that he made a personal examination, but there was no evidence that the skull had ever received an injury, so far as he could see.

"It's beyond my skill," he said, shaking his head. "I advise you to go to Virginia City, or San Francisco, for surgical treatment, and if you need money, I'll chip in freely to put the case through. I'd like to see you all right again."

"Oh! the money is all right," was the proud reply. "Ramrod Bar won't see Daddy Gray want for anything, and I think I'll mention your suggestion to them. I want to be cured so I can see what Cephas Brown had to do with me."

"What do you mean?"

"As soon as I saw him last night, I knew I had seen him some time away back in my life—before I lost myself. His face and his name were familiar—and, by the way, do you know ever since I heard that name I can see it floating before me in letters of fire, blood-red and large. Cephas Brown! The name and the man are familiar, and I know I ought to hate him. Some time he did me a wrong. When and how? Ah! that I can't tell, but I mean to know. I'll go to a doctor and get cured, and then I'll remember Cephas Brown."

The old man rambled on in this manner for some time, but though Barranca Bill was interested he could do him no good, and it was rather a relief when he arose to go.

He walked with considerable firmness, and from his window Bill watched as he left the town, and started on the trail to Ramrod Bar.

CHAPTER XIII.

A STRANGE ALLIANCE.

SHERIFF SHARPE's search for Helen Neville only served to increase the mystery surrounding her disappearance. He had looked through every house and shanty in the village, except the Weeping Willows, without finding a trace of her, and he confessed that he was wholly at fault.

Barranca Bill, however, was not to be baffled, and he sent Gentle John over to Ramrod Bar to see if, by any chance, the girl had sought refuge there; but he came back to report a failure.

He had found no sign of her, nor could any one give him a clew.

All these disappointments merely served to put Barranca Bill more in earnest; he resolved to find the young woman if she was alive.

Considering that she might some day bring him into serious trouble, he was acting oddly to become her champion, but he had somehow fixed on the idea that he must save her—why, he could not tell.

"Our former plan must now go into effect," he said to Gentle John, who was following his fortunes with unwavering fidelity; "we must enter the Weeping Willows in disguise, and see what we can learn. Or, perhaps, you don't feel like leaving your business?"

It was a gentle way of giving John a chance to withdraw if his courage was at all shaky, but the worthy master of the bowling-alley

knew so little of the meaning of fear that he did not suspect the cheat.

"Durn ther business when female innocence has ther call. I'll get Zeke Little ter 'tend ther place, an' Bob Lung kin set 'em up, as usual."

It was enough, and Barranca Bill had a pard who would pull in time as long as the boat held together.

After that, preparations went on steadily for the night's work. It was Bill's idea to seek the Weeping Willows so thoroughly disguised that even the keen eyes of Hecate would not discover the truth, and there seek to learn something of Helen.

How this was to be done he did not know, and he was sensible enough to confess to Gentle John that the plan was more romantic than promising, but the love of adventure which he had kept under control for the last five years was again in the ascendant, and he resolved to try the experiment.

He spent a considerable part of the day with his brother, but, thinking the latter had already enough on his mind, and fearing he, too, would volunteer to aid Helen, he said nothing of the intended venture.

A little after dark he left the house, and, being joined outside by Gentle John, they started at once for the Weeping Willows.

Horace Lincoln, on being left alone, settled down in his chair and trifled with Shakespeare. He showed no anxiety whatever for himself, and if he had been master of the house his manner would not have been easier.

He was following Brutus and Caius Cassius through their immortal quarrel when the door suddenly opened. He did not raise his eyes, supposing the intruder to be Hans Vedder; but the sound of a quick, light footfall betrayed the presence of a person other than the unwieldy Dutchman.

Quickly, then, he looked up, and a most astonishing sight met his gaze.

Before him stood a young lady of such beauty that he was momentarily dazzled, and he felt an absurd inclination to throw himself at her feet and worship as before a saint.

Yet there was nothing spirit-like about the young lady; she was simply a lovely girl, with a plump, graceful form, a fine face and the manners of a lady.

In brief, she was Vivian Brown.

One moment Horace Lincoln adored, and then he suddenly remembered his own position. He was seen by one of the outer world; how long would it be before the lynchers of Ramrod Bar would again be howling at his heels?

Vivian had paused in some embarrassment for a sign of recognition from one she did not doubt was Barranca Bill, for the resemblance deceived her like every one else, but as none came she spoke abruptly.

"Pardon me for intruding upon you, Mr. Lincoln, but your Dutch servant was asleep at the door, and I thought I would not disturb him. Perhaps, however, you are busy."

The words were enough to show Horace that he had been mistaken for his brother, and realizing the importance of continuing the impression if possible, he promptly arose.

"Busy? Not at all; I was dozing over my book; I don't believe I know a word I've read in the last ten minutes. Pray be seated."

Considerably mollified, Miss Brown complied.

"I suppose you did not expect me to return to our visit so soon," she said, smiling.

"If I didn't, you are none the less welcome," said Horace, gallantly, once more dazzled by her beauty.

"Oh! nonsense; I'll wager something you'll suffer from ennui all the while I stay."

"Now you wrong me," declared Horace, uncertain how far gallantry would be permissible in the case.

"Possible? Well, never mind; I came on business, and I won't lose any more time. Mr. Lincoln, I am in need of a friend, and in all Comet Camp I don't know where to go unless I come to you. I want an adviser who is brave, wise, and shrewd. You are all of those. May I ask for your aid?"

Horace Lincoln knew his duty then. Vivian's words and manner presaged something of unusual importance, and he knew it was his duty to make some excuse for deferring the statement; it certainly was not right that he should hear words intended for his brother's ear alone; but he was under the spell of her beauty, and he weakly put honor aside.

"You overestimate my ability, but you can rely on my faithfulness," he said.

"I deny the former. You are too well known in Comet Camp to escape your honors, Mr. Lincoln. The sobriquet of 'Barranca Bill' is in every one's mouth, and the stories they tell of his honor, bravery, and sagacity are marvelous. Do not slander yourself."

Horace felt a thrill of jealousy. His brother was very fortunate to be admired by this divine creature. For her, he would risk even his life—would Barranca Bill do more? What right had he to her admiration? He boasted of being a man of ice, while he—Horace—was a man of fire.

Which had the better right to this gay young girl?

While thanking thus, Horace managed to make a suitable reply, and as he took pains to speak like his brother, Vivian did not suspect the mistake she was making; she did not suspect she was taking a step wherein her future happiness, her life, was cast like a laser article on a scale.

"You, of course, believe me to be the only child of Mr. Brown," said the girl, abruptly.

"Are you not?" asked Horace, assuming surprise.

"That is just what I am asking myself. I have reason to suspect I shall soon be told that I am not."

The reply was so ambiguous that Horace gained no light whatever.

"I don't clearly see," he said.

"Naturally. Well, I will explain all. I am now nearly twenty years old, and until a few days ago I had supposed myself Mr. Brown's only child."

"Something has occurred to change your views, I judge."

"Decidedly so. Now, I do not wish you to think me mercenary, but I am wise enough to know the value of money, and I do not forget that my father is a rich man. This is why I am not prepared to bow tamely to the new order of things. Let me explain: The other day my father sent word that he wished to see me in his private room. I went, and he told me a singular story."

"And an unpleasant one?"

"You shall hear. He explained at great length that when he married my mother, the opposition of her parents compelled them to resort to secrecy, and for the same reason their first child was sent to an asylum, both agreeing that it must be temporarily abandoned. Afterward, my mother's parents died and the marriage was made public, they lived together until the death of my mother, and I was the offspring of their union."

"My father reproaches himself bitterly for leaving his first-born so long to the care of strangers and the hardships of her later life, and says he will now restore her to her rights. Of course you see what this means; an elder child, a woman, will be placed over me in the household."

"And there will be two heirs for the property," added Horace, shrewdly.

"I trust I am not mercenary enough to be influenced by that fact, in itself, but I am influenced by a suspicion in my mind."

"And that is—"

"That this Agatha, as he calls her, is not my sister and not his daughter," said Miss Brown, emphatically.

"What, then, is the game?"

"Perhaps you will laugh at me, but I believe there is some secret in my father's life. I have thought so for several years, but all has been vague and uncertain. Now, I have the skeleton of a theory."

"And that?"

"Is that this Agatha is to be his wife, and not his daughter. Somehow, I believe Cephas Brown fears some one, and that he dares not acknowledge his wife, so he will pass her off as his daughter."

Horace felt himself wholly at fault, since he did not even know this scheming Mr. Brown by reputation, but he was vividly conscious that a beauty and an heiress sat before him and he began to have vague ideas of a brilliant campaign.

"I love my father," continued Vivian, "but I am not disposed to submit to injustice, even to please him, and I intend to know more of the mysterious Agatha. Feeling the need of an able adviser, I have come to you, Mr. Lincoln."

"And I," said Horace, putting out his hand, "swear to serve you to the death!"

And with crossed hands, the compact was sealed.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHAT WILL THE HARVEST BE?

In taking this decisive step, Horace Lincoln put behind him all the compunctions he had felt about robbing his brother of his rights. This revelation had not been intended for his ears, and he knew it was his duty to avoid hearing it, but the beauty of Vivian Brown was too much for his sense of honor, and he had listened more to the music of her voice than to the story she told.

Anon, however, a golden vision arose before his eyes. Besides being a beauty, she was an heiress, and he knew the value of money.

There had been a brief inward struggle, and then he resolved to avail himself of the chance thrown at his feet. From that moment his efforts were directed, not to shielding himself from discovery, but to continuing the error of identity the girl had made, and to plans calculated to keep both Vivian and Barranca Bill in the dark.

"I dare say you have some plans," he said, after the compact was sealed.

"Vague ones only. I recognize the importance of learning just who and what this Agatha is, and has been. To do this skilled detectives must be employed, and I can furnish the money to pay them, but I feel my lack of wisdom in

that direction. A clearer mind than my own must direct them, and some person other than myself must confer with them and hear their reports. It is best that I should remain wholly in the background, and then, if my suspicions are absurd, I shall not have incurred the displeasure of a father I truly love."

Her voice trembled a little, but Horace was too much in earnest to see that sympathy would be well received at that point.

"I shall be glad to aid you," he promptly said, "and nothing shall be left undone to learn the truth. This Agatha shall be traced to the day of her birth. Tell me what you know of her."

Vivian complied, but as the statistics were few and vague, they need not be recorded here.

"I will place detectives on the track," resumed Horace, "and as you have a short period of grace before this Agatha arrives, I hope to have all made clear before that day. At any rate, the matter shall be pushed. Your resolution to remain in the background is very wise, and I would also suggest that we take pains to blind people to the fact that we are leagued together. Hum! how often do we usually see each other?"

He was feeling his way carefully.

"We were introduced two months ago," said Vivian, laughing. "Since then, we have seen each other to how about once a week, but we have not spoken until to-day. Oh! no one even places stress on the fact that we are acquaintances."

Horace shaded his eyes with his hand to hide the eager light he felt sure was there.

"So much the better for us," he said, "and the fact shapes our future course. We must lead a double life during our league and carry it out to the letter. Before the world we will remain as we have been, mere acquaintances. If we meet, whether in the eyes of others or alone, we shall be cold and distant. You must not inquire how I am succeeding, and I will not mention it in any way. The thicker the mask, the better."

"But how am I to know what progress you are making?" Vivian asked, in bewilderment.

"I am coming to that," said the schemer. "I said we would lead a double life. Well, every other night we must meet at some given point in the suburbs of the village, and I will make my report. I say by night, for it would be very rash to meet by day."

Vivian looked a little startled. She was not in the habit of indulging in such meetings, and, besides, Comet Camp was hardly a safe place for ladies to be abroad after dark.

Remembering her great object, and the high reputation of Barranca Bill, her resolution was soon made, however.

"Very well; I agree to the plan," she said, "but where can we meet?"

Luckily, Horace was able to answer the question clearly. Once, during his residence at Ramrod Bar as Paul Pindar, he had visited Comet Camp at night, and circumstances had drawn his attention to a place he believed well suited for the purpose in view.

"You remember the deserted cabin in the wild ravine west of the camp?"

"Graveyard Gulch?"

"Yes," he answered, at a venture.

"Certainly, and I suppose it will answer as well as any place, though it is terribly gloomy and forbidding."

"Eastern young ladies would call it awfully romantic," he laughed.

"I'm not an Eastern young lady, nor have I a desire to be one, but let that pass; that shall be the place of meeting."

"And you will be there—at nine o'clock, say—Wednesday night?"

A wave of something more than reluctance—it was, perhaps, the shadow of coming events—passed over the girl. She shivered slightly and yielded to a deep depression which impelled her to renounce the whole affair; but she remembered what was at stake, and faintly answered in the affirmative.

Some further and clearer conversation ensued, and then Miss Brown prepared to depart. Horace followed her to the door, where Hans Vedder still slumbered peacefully, and then, with a simple good-night, she went her way, and Horace retreated to the sitting-room.

Once there, he flung himself into a chair and began to think rapidly. He had allowed himself to go with the current, scarcely caring to what fate he drifted so long as the bright bonfire-light of Vivian's eyes was in sight; but he had taken a step which now demanded careful consideration.

For a long time he scarcely stirred, but, at last, his plans were laid and the future settled so far as he could control it.

"Miss Brown is a beauty and an heiress; just the kind of a woman I have long aspired to win for my wife. My inheritance is gone, I can't count up over two hundred dollars of my own; and if she is as rich as she says, lol I will make her Mrs. Horace Lincoln. It will be to my interest to baffle this new heiress, and if there is a flaw I will find it."

"What is Cephas Brown's game? Vivian be-

lieves he is about to marry again and bring his wife to Comet Camp as his daughter—in which case she must be young. Why all this secrecy? Vivian thinks he fears some one—fears to acknowledge his wife. Why? Clearly, Mr. Brown has a secret, and I'll let my detectives find it out. I am positive that in some way I shall rake in a big handful of the Brown gold. If I can't marry Vivian, I'll blackmail old Brown!"

Horace laughed lightly and then rubbed his hands together caressingly.

"I'm in the midst of another first-class intrigue, and though an ordinary man would give it up as a bad job, I intend to score a success. I think I have closed the girl's mouth, and I must hoodwink Bill by some sleight-of-hand trick. I suppose it isn't just right to play the roots on him after he has given me shelter in my hour of need, but I have never subdued the hatred I had for him in our childhood."

The ungrateful brother scowled darkly.

"I reckon I can put this resemblance to some practical good," he said. "I reckon I might go to the mine and draw his salary and no one discover the cheat until he showed up himself. Bah! I'll let such one-horse games alone; I'll play for the biggest stake and rake in the Brown dollars. I am to meet the fair Vivian frequently, and if I don't make her love me, I am a fool. Believing me to be the immaculate Barranca Bill, she will start well, and from respect to love the road is smooth and straight. Ten to one I win the game!"

And then Horace lighted a pipe and lay back in his chair to smoke and reflect, untroubled by any reflections that he had done what might yet bring Barranca Bill into serious difficulty.

Judging from circumstances, it would have been far better for the latter had he allowed the men of Ramrod Bar to take vengeance on "Paul Pindar."

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE TOILS.

WE left Helen Neville just as, after being lured into the Weeping Willows by Hecate, the door was closed in her face by the latter.

Explanations were not needed after that; Helen knew she had fallen into a trap and was in great peril, though its precise nature was unknown to her. For a time she had clung to the Witch because she was a woman—a sex not plentifully represented in Comet Camp—but with the tearing away of the vail came the darkest despair.

When one woman stoops so low as to betray another, to lead her to a den like the Weeping Willows, she must be indeed a degraded wretch.

Tired at last of beating at the door which yielded not a fraction to her efforts, and with her delicate hands bruised in more than one place, Helen turned to survey the room more closely.

It was of medium size, but no more could be said in its favor. Its uncarpeted floor was black with dirt, the walls showed a multitude of finger-marks, the furniture consisted of a single chair and a rude bed, while the clothing on the latter must necessarily look back far into the dim past for the date when they were last washed.

There was no window, but over the door a perforated iron plate, set in the wall, afforded a trifle of ventilation for the miserable den.

It was no wonder that, after a brief survey, Helen dropped into the single chair and gave way to temporary despair. Hers was a brave nature, but she had been reared among scenes so different from Comet Camp, and so seldom called upon to exhibit her courage, that this danger overwhelmed her.

Clearly enough she saw how completely she was in the power of the old woman, and she felt that she could expect no mercy. She blamed herself for having been lured to the den, forgetting what had been her mental condition when Hecate was playing her part.

Anon, her courage returned somewhat, and she arose and made a closer examination of the room. It merely served to increase her fears.

The room had doubtless been intended for a prison, for the boards were thick and heavy along the floor and walls, and firmly spiked, and the door was like that of a dungeon.

Without an ax, or something of the kind, even a strong man could not force his way out.

Helen resumed her seat, but her face was no longer pale. A flush had arisen to her cheeks and her eyes sparkled with light which told of a purpose it would not be well to dare.

In her pocket was a revolver which held six reliable cartridges, and she resolved to defend herself against whoever intruded upon her. She had slept two hours immediately after her arrival at Comet Camp, and there seemed to be no reason why she should not remain awake during the rest of the night.

Her vigil was interrupted at the end of two hours, however, for the clicking of a key was followed by the opening of a door and Hecate re-entered.

Helen kept her seat, and, with her hand on her revolver, looked defiantly at the old Witch.

The latter, who bore her staff, as usual, put out one hand with the palm forward, as though as a sign of peace.

"Have no fear, my pretty lady," she croaked, with her wretched imitation of kindness. "I come as a friend."

"Jailers usually are friends," retorted Helen.

"Jailers?"

"That's what I said."

"I hope you do not so regard me."

"Don't allow your hopes to run away with you; I am not a child, and I prefer to talk as woman to woman. I am your prisoner. What do you intend to do with me?"

"My poor dearie," said Hecate, with an attempt at horror, "you are entirely wrong. I am your best friend in Comet Camp, and I'll stand by you to the end. You are not a prisoner; if I brought you here by stratagem, it was to foil the mob, whose fury you little know."

"I suppose it was for that reason you locked me in this room?"

"Ah! you misjudged me then, dearie, and as I had no time to explain, I went away hastily."

Helen laughed harshly, for Comet Camp was teaching her new lessons of human depravity and changing her entire nature.

"You are an adept in all you undertake, except your role of an honest woman. Have done with this mockery and tell me my fate."

"Again you wrong me, dearie, but I will sketch your situation, as I see it. You came to Comet Camp in search of your runaway husband, this Barranca Bill, at whose feet all this town kneels as though he were a god. He refuses to own you, and by the burning of the Cosey Corral, all your baggage and money are destroyed. Now, what will you do? You are a stranger here, and humanity is a lost art to these men who worship Nevada's silver mines. What will you do—what can you do? Delicate as you are, you will alone be like a babe in the wood. Can you work in the mines? No, you are quite helpless."

"Go on," said Helen, tersely.

"Right here, I stretch forth my hand to aid you. I am a woman, like yourself, and my heart is tender. Hear my offer: I keep a hotel, a respectable place which can't be excelled in Nevada. I need a girl to help me entertain my guests—not to talk to them; oh! no, for I believe in keeping them at a distance; but, exiled from the East and its pleasures, they sigh for music, for the old songs of home, sweet home, to which their memories cling even yet. Now, my dearie, if you will sit in my parlor of an evening and sing the sweet old ballads, I will not only pay you well, but I faithfully agree to aid you to bring your false husband to justice. I'll touch his heart and unite your future lives in a halo of peace, love and happiness."

Hecate had gushed even more than usual, but she could never regain her hold upon Helen. The latter read her evil nature well, and she made a gesture of loathing.

"Let us end this scene right here," she curtly said. "You and I are enemies, and in no other light will I regard you. I will not sing to your guests who so adore the 'sweet old ballads.' I am not a tiger-tamer. I do not believe the Cosey Corral is burned; but, if so, I'll take my chances with the rude miners rather than with you."

Hecate was filled with fury, but her wrinkled face was a good mask and she gave no sign as she lifted her hands and whined:

"My poor dearie! my poor dearie!"

"Rubbish!" said Helen. "I wish you would abandon sentiment; and, as the miners say, give us a new deal."

The Witch did not reply. With her eyes fixed on vacancy she seemed deep in thought. Helen was tempted to try to pass her at all hazards, but the faint sound of coarse voices outside warned her that she might go from bad to worse.

The pause was broken as the door was again flung open, this time nearly upsetting Hecate, and Luke Gridley strode into the room.

There was a triumphant smile on his evil face, but it gave place to a look of undisguised admiration as he looked at Helen.

He removed his hat and bowed low.

"Your humble servant, miss," he uttered.

Hecate caught his arm and began shaking him angrily.

"How dared you come here?" she demanded, shrilly. "I am tempted to crack your skull with my staff, you idiot!"

"Don't do it, my dear madam, don't. My skull is not a walnut; don't crack it. But why do you blame me? Have I no taste for beauty?"

He bowed once more to Helen, but she felt a terrible fear which she could ill disguise. Luke Gridley, with his low brows, furtive eyes and thick lips, was more easily read than Hecate, and, together, they made a pair not unlike cobras di capello.

The Witch accepted the situation with as good grace as possible, though she knew that from that moment her trouble with Helen would increase. Luke had seen her, and the light in his ambushed eyes told how much he admired.

Yet clinging fast to the plan she had formed, the old woman mentally swore she would

protect her prisoner even at the risk of her life.

As we have already seen, this was for business reasons, not from any kindness of heart.

"You are an idiot, young man," she brusquely said. "Go back to your studio; that daub, which you call 'The Sunset Hour among the Sierras,' will never be finished at this rate."

Gridley caught her meaning, and was wise enough to temporize.

"You have no artistic feeling at all, my dear madam," he said gayly. "That painting will bring me many golden dollars in New York—unless I see fit to present it to the Art Museum."

"While making your decision, I beg that you will leave me alone," interrupted Helen. "Good-night."

"Good-night, dearie," replied Hecate, with her croaking voice. "May your sleep be peaceful."

She pushed Luke toward the door, unheeding Helen's bitter laugh, but the sight of the open way proved too much for the prisoner's calmness.

Acting on a sudden rash impulse, she darted forward, pushed Hecate so forcibly to one side that she lost her balance and fell, and then gliding past Gridley, she ran along the passage at full speed, looking eagerly for some avenue of escape.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LAMBS OF THE WEEPING WILLOWS.

If Helen had taken time for mature thought, it is doubtful if she would have made her attempt under the very eyes of Hecate; but once clear of the room, she began to have some hope and her gaze eagerly sought an avenue of escape.

She was in a long, narrow hall, from which doors opened on both sides; but all were closed. She made a rush for the nearest and it yielded to her touch, but the room beyond was merely a sleeping chamber like the one she had just left.

Baffled, she turned just in time to thrust the muzzle of her revolver toward the Witch, who had darted after her.

"Back!" cried the girl, desperately. "Keep away, or I swear that I will fire!"

Hecate had paused abruptly, duly regardful of her danger; but she put up her hands with the old gesture.

"Now, dearie," she began whiningly; but at that moment the crack of a revolver turned to thunder in the close room, and Helen's own weapon went spinning from her hand.

It fell a few feet away, and as Hecate promptly pounced upon it, Helen stood defenseless before her enemies. Her hand, strangely numbed, had dropped to her side, and as she saw Luke Gridley putting away a revolver in his belt, she knew he had accomplished thefeat of shooting hers from her hand.

The act rendered her helpless.

"Now, my dearie," remonstrated Hecate, as she made sure of the revolver, "you should not be so rash. Do you not know that we are your best friends? I could call you ungrateful for putting my life in jeopardy, but I know that youth is often indiscreet."

"For my own part," said Gridley, once more removing his hat as he advanced, "I humbly beg your pardon for my act. Perhaps it was unpardonable, but I feared you would do that for which you would be sorry afterward."

Helen did not answer. She stood panting before them like a deer after the chase, and in her eyes was a look not unlike that of that same animal. At that moment she would have welcomed death, but even the means of self-destruction had been taken from her.

Once more Hecate addressed her, but as there was no answer, she ruminated for a moment and then suddenly laid her hand on the girl's arm.

"Come with me, dearie," she said.

"What now?" Helen asked, hoarsely.

"I will convince you that I am your friend, even though I have to take you to the ashes of the Cosey Corral," the old Witch declared.

A gleam of hope crossed Helen's face, but it speedily vanished. She would as soon trust the Evil One as this woman. She made no reply, however, for a sort of leaden feeling seemed creeping over her and she thought, with fresh despair, that if the outer door stood open she could not drag her feet over the threshold.

Yet, when Hecate took her arm, she followed her lead like one in a dream and they passed toward the other end of the hall.

A scowl crossed Luke Gridley's face, and he plucked at the Witch's arm, but she cast off his hold and pressed forward.

Opening the door she led Helen into another, but smaller hall, and then, throwing back another door, ushered her into a place, the minutest details of which lingered long in the memory of the girl.

It was a square room of considerable size, with benches, tables and chairs of a rough style—not unlike the bar room into which Barranca Bill

looked the next morning, except that no bar was visible.

The place was fairly lighted, and around at the tables, smoking, drinking and playing cards, or on the benches fast asleep, or walking about for exercise, were to be seen over a score of the most villainous-looking wretches in Nevada.

Ragged and dirty of dress, brutal and dirty of features and none too sober, they presented a degree of depravity Helen had never before seen.

"These are my Lambs, dearie," said the Witch of the Weeping Willows, blandly.

The opening of the door had been unheeded, but as one fellow chanced to look up his exclamation aroused others and then a murmur ran through the room, card-playing and smoking were suspended, and every eye was turned toward Helen.

Hecate had not misjudged the temper of her Lambs.

Luke Gridley was less pleased. He had fallen violently in love with their prisoner, and it cut him like a knife to have her subjected to the gaze of that crowd of russians. Rascal he was himself, but his tastes were refined to a considerable degree.

"Ho!" cried Hecate, dropping her wheedling tone, "are you all awake, men? Take a look at the lily I have brought to my hot-house. Behold the new Jenny Lind, the Nightingale of the Nor'west. This is the sweet singer of Nevada."

A burly fellow in a red shirt dashed down his cards and strode forward a pace.

"Let her sing Glory Hallelujah an' we'll jine in ther chorus!" he declared. "Ef any sech flower ez ter bloom in this tumble-down ranch, we don't go back on ther lay-out. Pards, I move three cheers fur ther Nightingale!"

The matter would have been unanimous, but Hecate put out her staff.

"Stop!" she commanded. "No cheering here, my Lambs; not a cheer. Do you want the Vigilantes down on us?"

A ten minutes' speech would not have been more effective upon the "Lambs," and yet it was not what she said that subdued their intended outburst.

It was the wave of her staff.

Every one of the Lambs knew her gentle way. They had seen her crack human heads with that staff, they had seen her use revolver and knife with rare skill, and once she had quelled a mutiny by permanently blinding a rough with vitriol; but of all things the staff ranked the highest.

It was her badge of office; it was at once the wand of a magician and the baton of an orchestral director; and by its power she ruled the Lambs.

As long as they were housed under the roof of the Weeping Willows, they must obey her will or dare her wrath—and not one of the hard-fighters would tempt the latter.

"We are mum, Queen," said the big miner, "but we begs as how you'll let us say ter ther Nightingale that she are right welcome an' we are her humble servants from ther word go. We wishes you solid chunks o' good luck, Nightingale!"

He removed his hat and made a sweeping bow.

"An' we hopes ez how you'll chip in with a song, Nightingale," added a second.

The call ran through the ranks of the russians, who had pressed well to the front, and the Witch turned to Helen.

Poor child! she was suffering pains more terrible than those of death at that moment. As soon as she saw the desperadoes her stupor had vanished and she became keenly alive to the situation, but her strength seemed all gone and she could not have fled had the chance been given her.

Suddenly, however, another change passed over her; a mingling of courage and desperation which made her like steel.

Perhaps, by some chance, she could touch the hearts of those rude men; perhaps, among them all, there was one man not entirely dead to honor.

Acting on this idea, she lost no time, and no one was more surprised than Hecate when, without any urging, her voice arose, clear, correct and pure as that of a prima donna, and on the ears of the wild men fell the rare music of the "Star Spangled Banner."

It was long since they had heard it, unless in derision, and a dead silence reigned in the room.

Every one was more or less affected by admiration and wonder, and Hecate was delighted, but it was Luke Gridley who muttered under his breath:

"There is a fortune in her voice! She is beautiful, refined and intelligent, and I love her. She shall not sing in this vile den; I'll abandon the claim on old Brown, marry her and skip for the East."

Unconscious of this pretty little scheme, Helen kept on to the end of the song, when she was greeted by applause which the Witch allowed to go unchecked for some time before she made that magic wave of her staff which turned the hyenas into their usual lamb-like condition.

They called for another song and were treated to one new to them but so stirring that their interest did not abate.

Helen was preparing for a grand effort, and at the third call the matchless words and music of "Home, Sweet Home," were poured on their ears.

The fair singer, who felt that it was for her life she labored, sung as never prima donna did to touch the hearts of her hearers; but in placing her hopes she had merely been brought to realize that men can become so callous as to be indifferent to all that is good.

The song fell flat. Even Helen saw this at the first, and though the fact merely spurred her on to fresh efforts, it was plain that bad she not been a beautiful woman, the song would have been greeted with hisses.

Old Hecate's Lambs were not of common clay; they were of the grime and slime of the world's refuse.

Yet, what a scene it was for an artist's touch. The ragged, unshaven and brutal men, the sinister face of better-clad Luke Gridley, the witch-like porportions of Hecate, and the fair young singer among the repulsive crowd.

It was over at last. Fresh applause from the Lambs, a wave of Hecate's staff which sent them back to their seats; and then she led her captive through the door.

Helen made no resistance. She had not given up all hope of finding a protector among the roughs, but she was shrewd enough to see that the time was not yet come, and she resolved to act prudently.

"Oh! my dearie, my dearie!" chanted the Witch, as the door closed behind them, "what a triumph; what a grand success! You sing like an angel, and the Lambs will adore the ground upon which you walk."

"I prefer to walk outside," Helen bluntly replied.

"Ab! ab! would you go where you have no friends? Listen! If you will sing to my boarders I will pay you—pay you—a dollar a night, and a'so help you find your husband. I always keep my word, don't I, Mr. Gridley?"

Luke had followed from the larger room and stood morosely gnawing his mustache.

"Always," he returned, with undisguised sarcasm.

"Let me go to Cosey Corral and think of it."

"But the Cosey Corral is burned, my dearie."

"Let me go somewhere—anywhere!" cried the girl, in desperation.

"As you will, my dearie; follow me."

Hecate abruptly moved forward through a door, leading Helen, and then, when Gridley would have followed, she slammed the door in his face and locked it.

Uttering a curse, he flung his whole weight against the wood, but it had been made to resist just such shocks, and he found his labor thrown away.

CHAPTER XVII. BARRANCA BILL BEARDS THE LAMBS IN THEIR DEN.

It was exactly eight hours later than the events just related that Barranca Bill and Gentle John called at the Weeping Willows in search of Helen Neville. The reader will remember that they were escorted over the entire place by Hecate, but that they saw no sign whatever of the missing girl.

Moreover, it will be remembered that the two men, not yet satisfied, resolved to seek the den once more, this time in disguise, and that they started the next evening, at a time about twenty-four hours later than when Miss Neville's troubles began.

The work thus taken was far from being a pleasant one, and no one was better aware that it was full of danger than Barranca Bill. Old Hecate's "Lambs" were well known in Comet Camp, and it was only because they were so much feared that they were allowed to exist.

It was, as has been said, the refuge of the worst men of Nevada, and Hecate, who was full of worldly wisdom, managed to keep her followers from doing any deed of violence in the town itself.

Numerous and bold as they were, Comet Camp would soon make short work of them if aroused.

Inside the Weeping Willows none but desperadoes were allowed, and Barranca Bill and Gentle John were aware that, should their disguise be penetrated, the Lambs would do their level best to send them over the range on their last journey.

"If we lose our lives on this expedition men will say we died as the fool dieth," observed Bill, willing to give his ally a last chance to reude.

"I don't reckon the witch'll send an obituary ef we die in ber den," said Gentle John, dryly. "We shall bev ter ante over inter ther next world afore we kin find an alley whar we kin set 'em up ag'in."

"Are you ready to go?"
"That depends. Ther life o' man is but a bowlin' alley, anyhow. Death knocks over a pin every year, an' it all depends on how well stocked ther alley is how long we keep up ther game. Ef my pins are all down but one, death

kin take me in ter-night; but ef that is more, I reckon I'll walk out o' ther Weepin' Willer a victor, an' in my own alley chalk ther score fur many a day ter come while Bad Lung sets 'em up."

Gentle John spoke cheerfully, and Bill tried no more to arouse his fears.

As they approached the Weeping Willows it was as dark and silent as usual, but without hesitation they approached the door. An exertion of the place had once given the entrance secret to John, and now they meant to use it.

Once inside—well, then a good deal depended on whether their disguises were penetrated.

Barranca Bill walked straight to the door and rapped boldly, but in a peculiar way. Dead silence followed, but it was what they expected. According to the programme, the door-keeper had summoned Hecate.

After a proper delay the knock was repeated, and this time the door promptly swung open, revealing the Witch with a gigantic negro just behind her.

"Well, what is it?" the woman asked, surveying the applicants closely.

"We want kiver, marm," said Barranca Bill, in a voice no one would have recognized as his own. "We want ter see ther Queen."

"I am the Queen."

"Then take us in, quicker'n a wink. That's no knowin' when the dogs o' war will drop on us."

"An' ef they drop, hyar we be."

Gentle John finished by running his finger around his neck in a suggestive way.

"Come in."

Hecate was at all times suspicious, but, certainly, the applicants, in their disguise, looked villainous enough for seats with her Lambs, and as she was ready to give them shelter if they could prove that they were cut-throats good and true, it was not wise to keep them outside the door.

She led them to a small room, while the black giant kept the door.

"By what right do you seek the Weeping Willows?" she abruptly demanded.

"Wal, yer see we had a bit o' diffikilty in Bloody Bend an' accidentally laid out a pair o' men, but ther Vigilantes onjustly arizan' we had sterm cut an' run. We want ter lay low till ther storm blows over."

"Why do you come to me?"

"I knowed a man oncet named Sile Eagan who tolle me o' you an' your Lambs, an' that is why we came."

"Very well; I dare say you are true blu, and the Weeping Willows is open to you. All I have to say is that if you play me false, your lives will be the forfeit."

"That's right an' proper, Queen."

"What are your names?"

"I'm Zack Trimble."

"An' I'm Tom Quartz," added Gentle John.

"Very well; come with me!"

They slouched after her, grimly maintaining their assumed character, and in a minute more were ushered into the same room where Helen Neville had nineteen hours before given her songs.

The adventurers saw the same scene she had looked upon when brought before the russians.

Hecate thumped her staff upon the floor and the men looked up simultaneously.

"Lambs," she said, in a clear voice. "I bring you two good men and true. Use them well, for they have a record. This is Zack Trimble, and this, Tom Quartz. Make yourself at home, men."

With the last words the Witch receded, the door closed behind her, and the adventurers were alone with the score and more of "Lambs."

Barranca Bill promptly advanced a few steps.

"Pards," he said, blufly, "I'm Zack Trimble, an' though I don't want ter blow my own bugle, ther is them that says, I am a good man ter tie to. I'm a stranger hyar, an' I hopes you'll take me in."

The address was not needed, for the Lambs knew just what to do after Hecate had thus ushered in the new-comers.

Her address meant more than appeared on the surface; it said to the Lambs: "Make these men welcome, but watch them!"

As a result, they were as blufly welcomed as they had applied, and when they had ordered a drink for the crowd, they were duly elected to the society of Lambs.

Their position, however, was one which would have worried men less brave. The brutal wretches about them were like tigers sleeping. Once aroused, the odds would be twelve to one, and the Lambs knew no mercy.

Barranca Bill and Gentle John were not men to tremble, however. Long years of wild life had not only accustomed them to peril, but sharpened their wits, and they knew just how to proceed to please the human tigers.

Naturally, they were at once invited to try their luck at poker. The Lambs believed in a division of the world's goods, and when an outsider entered the den, he was supposed not only to be well supplied but to be gently bled until he was as nearly penniless as themselves.

The adventurers did not hesitate. They had

brought only a small sum of money, but they knew just how to handle that. Accomplished players, they intended to just hold their own in the game.

With two stout cut-throats against them, they settled down to work, while the other men relapsed into their old condition as though nothing had occurred.

Barranca Bill, while seemingly absorbed in his play, did not fail to keep his ears open, and after a while two men near his back began to talk on an interesting subject.

"I wonder ef ther Queen intends ter trot in ther Nightingale ter-night?" asked one.

"She promised ter do it ev'ry night."

"Yes, but I understand ther gal objects. Seems that she ain't willin', nohow, an' I more than half suspect ther Queen stole her."

"Sh! Go light! Wal, she er the neatest bit o' female prettiness in Comet Camp, anyhow. Thunder an' lightnin' ef she would cleave ter me I'd— But, bahl! she wouldn't wipe her shoes on me; what's ther use o' sposenin' a case?"

"She sings like an angel."

"Yer won't bear her ter-night," put in a third voice. "Ther Queen has hid her somewhar', an' she is gwinne ter keep her out o' sight. Didn't we see them galoots in hyar this mornin'—that Barranca Bill an' t'other feller? They was arter her, but ther Queen had anticipated their racket an' hid ther gal."

"Took her away from ther Weepin' Willers?"

"That I don't know. Mebbe she did, or mebbe ther is a secret room hyar."

"That reminds me, I heerd some persons leave ther house an' ride away on bosses jest afore daybreak. I'll bet my head one was ther gal, an' we won't hear no more singin'."

"Don't you worry," broke in still another voice. "Ther Queen knows her business. Ther gal belonged at ther Cosey Corral an' thar is a row over her disappearance. She has been took ter another place fur a while. Ef ther storm blows over, she comes back hyar ter entrance our souls with melody. Ef it don't blow over, why, ther Queen will plant her in ther mountings. Dead women tell no tales, but ther tongue o' a livin' one whips around wuss than a boa constrictor with a chicken-bone in his throat."

Barranca Bill had listened eagerly to all this, and the confidence with which the last speaker declared that the girl had been removed from the Weeping Willows was so convincing that, had the way been open, he would then and there have left the den.

Ill-ventilated and so wretchedly peopled, he had never been in so vile a place before.

At that moment, however, something caused him to look at two men on his right. They were talking in that secret whisper which is always suspicious; but as Bill looked one of them suddenly thrust out his arm and tore a false beard from the other's face.

Then Barranca Bill sat dumfounded at what he saw.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A REVOLVER ARGUMENT.

THE face thus exposed to sight was perfectly familiar to Barranca Bill, and it was no wonder he was amazed; of all men, he least expected to see him there.

It was Cephas Brown.

"I call you!" said one of the superintendent's opponents in the game, but the call fell on heedless ears.

Barranca Bill could only stare at Brown and wonder what strange object had brought him to the Weeping Willows. For one moment he asked himself if it could be that the politician was leagued with Hecate, but the movements of Mr. Brown answered the question negatively.

One moment he seemed startled by his mishap, and then out came his revolver like a flash.

If he intended to use it on the man who had unmasked him, his purpose miscarried; for the broad hand of the rough swept forward and closed around the barrel, turning the muzzle well up, and it would have been a waste of lead to pull the trigger.

Barranca Bill saw a look of desperation pass over Brown's face, and he realized that the man was there in disguise like themselves, though he could not guess his object.

The politician made one effort to regain his revolver, but the rough held fast and the smile which crept over his face told how confident he was in regard to his superior strength.

Brown's hand darted inside his miner's shirt, came out and arose—something bright glittered for an instant in the light—there was a forward sweep and a long-bladed bowie was driven to the hilt in the body of the rough.

The deed had been done with a quickness not to be expected from the politician; except for that the steel would never have touched the ruffian; but as it was, he released his hold on the revolver, threw up both hands and then, staggering back a pace, dropped heavily to the floor, dead before he touched it.

The sound of the fall brought every Lamb to his feet, for though peace usually reigned at the

Weeping Willows, most of them had heard that dull thud in saloons from Tom's tone to British Columbia.

On the floor lay a dead man; above him stood the Honorable Cephas Brown, a revolver in one hand and a crimson bowie in the other.

In the brief burst which followed, Barranca Bill pushed to the side of Gentle John.

"Do we chip in or vamose?" he tersely asked.

"Back ther ole man till ther last pin is down!" John promptly answered.

"Good! we are together."

Bill glanced upward at the lights. A little fine shooting would plunge the room into utter darkness, but he had a strong desire to learn the exact standing of Mr. Brown in the society of Lambs.

"He forced it upon me; it was no fault of mine!" cried the politician. "It was a matter of self-defense."

"A stranger?"

"A spy!"

"Joe Darwin is down—kill ther murderer!"

These cries arose from the Lambs, and every man drew his weapons. Revolver and knives flashed in the light, and each cut-throat's face bore an ominous scowl. It was a thirst for blood.

In the opinion of Barranca Bill there was but one way to save Brown's life, and his own weapons were turned toward the lights when a heavy thump on the floor acted like a dash of ice water on the human tigers.

Hands dropped, the attack was delayed, and then old Hecate pressed to the front.

Without a word she glanced at the dead man, and then at Cephas Brown, and the sight was one which could not be mistaken.

Barranca Bill, however, believed he saw a strange look on her face; instead of the fury one would expect, she seemed troubled and startled.

The Lambs expected to be ordered upon the intruder, but, instead, their Queen leaned heavily on her staff, and remained silent.

Brown mistook the pause, and actually believed his plea of self-defense would be received. He began to speak again, but Hecate put out one hand.

"Be silent!" she said; "I can guess your plea; criminals never have but one. Who saw this deed done?"

No one answered. Several men were aware that the two had been in consultation for some time, but there had been no evidence of a quarrel until the matter was in a white heat.

Barranca Bill was only at a loss to know what secret conversation had passed between them; it was clear that Joe Darwin had suspected his companion, and unmasked him from enmity.

Some one volunteered the information that the "spy" was the Honorable Mr. Brown, but Hecate waved the man back imperiously.

"I would like to inquire," she said, frigidly addressing the politician, "how you gained entrance here?"

"Isn't it a hotel?" Brown demanded.

"No; it is a boarding house."

"Well, why shouldn't I come here?"

"Because—but never mind. How did you enter?"

"At the door."

"It is false. A window has been left unfastened somewhere, and when you were once inside, your disguise protected you."

"He is a spy!" cried a big fellow. "Give me the word, an' over he goes!"

"Stop!" commanded Hecate, fiercely. "We will have no blood shed here. If Joe Darwin forced a quarrel, he got no more than he deserved."

She waved her staff in that fashion which usually acted so like magic upon them, but in this case only dark frowns resulted. Joe Darwin had been a favorite, and if the remaining Lambs had had their way, they would have flung themselves on the slayer in a body.

Barranca Bill began to hope for a peaceful termination, for it was evident that Hecate wished to save the politician—why, we need not explain when it is remembered that she was the ally of Luke Gridley, who hoped to secure a fortune from Cephas Brown's money-bags.

Hecate was aware that she had a delicate piece of work before her. Up to that time she had ruled the Lambs with an iron hand, but it was because she had humored their desires at all times except in case of internal broils.

To take away a man who had killed a favorite rough was a more complicated work.

She began to speak to gain time, but one of the Lambs in the rear of the crowd at this point set himself up as a shooter. He was resolved that Brown should not escape, and, deliberately but secretly, he drew a bead on him.

Barranca Bill saw this and drew his conclusions. A rebellion of the roughs seemed at hand; plainly, they would not consent to the pardon of the man who had shot Joe Darwin, and if the fellow pulled the trigger, Cephas Brown would go off the earthly stage.

This mental decision decided Bill and he acted quickly. Up went his hand, and as two reports blended as one there was a clatter of glass,

the lights went out and total darkness reigned in the room.

As soon as he had pressed the triggers Bill sprung toward Brown and grasped his arm.

"I am a friend: Quick! get out of this if you would save your life!" he hissed in his ear.

Brown heard and was convinced, and as he was pulled away, offered no resistance.

The superintendent and his ally were not men to hesitate in emergency, and by the time the Lambs fairly comprehended what had happened they were at the hall door.

"Let no one leave the room!" cried Hecate, sharply; but for once she had moved too slowly.

The trio passed the door, but as they did so the bulky form of the black giant loomed up in the darkness; but Barranca Bill sent out his clinched fist and a heavy fall followed.

Gentle John had sprung for the outer door, and as he turned the ponderous key the way of escape was open.

The foremost of the Lambs surged into the hall, but they had barely a glimpse of the fugitives as they darted out into the street.

Barranca Bill thought pursuit probable and once more caught Brown's arm.

"Run, if you value your life!" he said. "We must throw these cut-throats off the track."

The politician was glad enough to have a good leader, and the three at once took to the cover of a group of shanties and indulged in a series of maneuvers which ultimately brought them out of all danger and, to all appearances, beyond the sight of enemies.

"Here we part," said Barranca Bill, abruptly.

"I owe you a life," said Brown, with unusual fervor, "for had it not been for you, I should be mince-meat now."

"That thar ez a bad place ter go on a spree."

"Right; and I will never be found there again. But you, gentl men—I owe you a life. Tell me your names and you shall be rewarded."

"Pass it by, mister, fur we ain't arter a reward. Ez fur names, what's in'em? We keeps our'n shady. Ef you take my advice, you'll amble home. We're off!"

With the last word Bill strode away, followed by Gentle John, and, unheeding Brown's call, soon left him behind. Why the former had concealed his identity from Brown he hardly knew, since by divulging he might possibly learn why the elder man had gone to the Weeping Willows, but it was his whim.

"John," he said, as they strode homeward, "where is Helen Neville?"

"Now you stick me. My wits are all down but nine, an' they ain't vivid. Pears like, from what ther feller said, they hev taken her away from ther Willers."

"Exactly; and now we must look further. If harm comes to that girl it won't be my fault. I swear that I will help her if I can!"

"Hyar's my hand," said Gentle John. "We've lost ev'ry move in ther game so fur, but we'll set 'em up ag'in an' bowl ther alley clean."

"The Witch is a sharp one from the word go, and Sheriff Sharpe can't rake the board while she holds a hand. We must put wit against wit and beat her at her own game. I know honest men who will rally at my call, and from this hour the Weeping Willows shall be watched. Once let me make dead sure Helen Neville is not there and I'll apply the torch to the old barn. It is a disgrace to Nevada; the State don't hold its equal."

"Right you are," replied Gentle John, with unusual fervor; "an' I'm with yer while ther pins stand up. I am a small fighter when I git mad, an' you may consider me enlisted—me'n Bad Lung."

"This Brown puzzles me. Why was he there?"

"Now you stick me."

"Wait! I have an idea. I called on him today in regard to Miss Neville. He denied all knowledge of her. I stated that I feared she was imprisoned at the Weeping Willows. I believe I catch the idea: Mr. Cephas Brown does know who she is, and that's why he went there himself. What's in the wind now?"

It was a useless question. Gentle John could advance no theory, and Barranca Bill was equally at fault. A long discussion failed to throw light on the mystery, and after considerable delay they decided to separate for the night.

When Bill reached his house, Vivian Brown was already gone, so he had no suspicion of her interview with Horace.

CHAPTER XIX.

ALMOST A TRAGEDY.

RAMROD BAR was not so large a place as Comet Camp, but in all other respects it was its superior. In a quiet way its people were making money, a court of law had been established, and though Judge Lynch now and then caught up the ribbons, as we have seen, the typical rough of the West did not flourish there.

Moreover, while Comet Camp and its vicinity was as bare of vegetation as a billiard ball, Ramrod Bar had some little claim to the wearing of the green, and a man who was descend-

ing the mountain side, the morning after the event just related, paused on an elevated point, and audibly remarked that the Bar was a lovely place.

After that he went on his way, entered the village, and made his way to a cabin near its center.

He entered.

On the rude couch lay a man of massive form. He was six feet in height, broad-shouldered, and so finely proportioned from head to foot that he had none of that lankness usual to six-footers.

Despite his magnificent physique, his face was pale, his eyes heavy, and it was plain he was far from being a well man.

He looked up with a smile when his visitor entered, however.

"Hello!" he said, "so you're back, Daddy Gray?"

"Yes, George," replied the old man, in his usual gentle way. "I went up to my own cabin last night, as you advised, and I slept so well I shall not need to sleep again this week—"

"Hol' on thar, Daddy; jest you hol' on. D'y'e s'pose I'm gwine ter hev you wear out your ole buddy nussin' me? Not while all Ramrod Bar stands at my back. Ah! every man hyar is my friend, Daddy, an' they're ready ter chip in. I feel a good bit better this mornin', an' my constitution will pull me through. But, you, Daddy—you're an ole man, an' ef you do too much you'll lose yer buddy ez well ez your mind."

The sick man spoke with bluff kindness, and one would have said he was an honest, large-souled man, always ready to befriend the needy and deeply grateful for a favor received.

"It is a sad thing to lose one's mind, George," sighed the old man.

"You are right; but you know you hev piles o' friends at Ramrod Bar. Now an' then some skittish chap jokes you a leetle, but they means wal, Daddy."

"And you are the best of the lot. They show good judgment to call you Honest George."

"I hope I desarve et, fur I intend ter do ther squar' thing, Daddy. By ther way, I've sent ter Warginny City fur a surgeon."

The old man held up both hands.

"A real surgeon, George?"

"Yes."

"Why, that'll cost heaps of money, and—and I could nurse you, George."

"I want to get wal quick," said the giant, a strange look creeping over his face. "Do yer hear me?—quick, I say. I wish I was up now."

"Nobody'll touch your mine, George."

"Hang the mine! that don't worry me. I want to git wal fur vengeance! Do yer hear me!—fur vengeance, I say."

"Ahl yes; you're thinking of Paul Pindar."

"So I am, and ther thoughts er a-burnin' in my brain; they burn worse than his bullet in my side. I hope I ain't a hard man, Daddy, but down in ther gulch Square Rob—my brother—sleeps in death, an' I've got a pill in my side. Ef Paul Pindar had shot us fa'r, I wouldn't be ther man ter kick, but it was a coward's work. He cheated; we accused him on't, and then he shot us like the coward he was, without a chance fur our lives. D'y'e think I'll b'ar that? D'y'e take me fur a coward, Daddy? No, no; I sw'ar that I'll foller him like a bloodhound an' avenge ther murder o' my brother!"

Honest George poured forth the words with the utmost vehemence, and as, at the end, he lifted one hand, his shirt fell back from a hard, brawny arm where lurked great physical strength.

Meek Daddy Gray stood appalled at this mental storm, with no words of reply ready, and the giant continued:

"You see'd ther man at Comet Camp who looked so much like Paul Pindar, but warn't him, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did, George."

"Was ther resemblance strikin'?"

"It was very remarkable at first, but after a little while, and when he had said that he was Mr. Lincoln, the mine superintendent, I couldn't see any likeness at all."

Honest George laughed harshly.

"Your crowd was blind, Daddy Gray, blind as bats, an' you was all fooled. I tell ye Paul Pindar an' Barranca Bill er one an' ther same person. Ther dog put on airs an' played bluff on ye, that was all, but one o' these days that game won't work. I'm goin' ter hev a surgeon who'll set me right on my pins, an' then I'll take ther track!"

The giant fairly hissed the words, and Daddy Gray, who had known him as one of the kindest of men, put forth his hands in horror.

"Georgel Georgel what would you do?"

"I'd kill Paul Pindar as he killed my brother, an' I know whar ter look fur him. He is Barranca Bill! Oh! he can't fool me ez he did Sam Soaper, an' when I git thar—Daddy, do you see that arm?"

Honest George stretched out the member, all along which were visible the cords which were like knotted ropes, and near the shoulder a mass of muscle that was almost a deformity, but which merely showed the immense strength of its owner.

"That's me!" he said, with pardonable pride,

"an' ther instant I git on my legs I'll start fur Barranca Bill. When I find him, I'll crush him—cr-r-rush him as I would a p'ison snake!"

He ground the words out between his teeth in a way which almost drove Daddy Gray wild, and his trembling old hands went up in the air again; but just then the entrance of another miner put an end to the conversation.

Daddy Gray shook his head slowly.

"Poor George is losing his head just as I have lost mine. I never heard him talk that way before, and he was always so gentle. Ah! the death of Square Rob has turned his head. I wonder if Barranca Bill is really Paul Pindar? I don't know, but it'll be a sad day for him when Honest George gets on his track."

Looking at the handsome giant on the bed, one could not doubt the truth of Daddy's assertion.

It was two hours later when Daddy Gray left the cabin and began to ascend the mountain side to his own little home. It had been arranged that he should watch that night with Honest George, and the miners had driven him away so that he might husband his strength.

His destination was nearly reached when, as he was passing along at the foot of a cliff, he suddenly paused and stood staring in perplexity at a dark object in his very path.

"A woman!" muttered the old man. "A woman! Why, who is it, and how came she here? Is she asleep? Oh! no, no; she fell off the rocks!"

This decision was no sooner reached than he was down on his knees beside her. She lay in a heap, a shawl she had worn nearly concealing her face, but with skillful hands Daddy Gray proceeded to act the part of a surgeon.

Examination showed that she was young and good-looking, well dressed and refined of look, and, best of all, she still lived, and, though having a cut on the head of unpleasant extent, did not seem likely to die unless there was some internal injury.

Daddy Gray saw that good care was needed, and, raising her in his arms with the surprising strength we have once before noted in him, he bore her to his cabin and to his own bed.

Possessing a few simple remedies, he at once set to work to restore her to consciousness, but it proved to be a longer and harder task than he had expected.

It was past noon when she finally opened her eyes, and Daddy's heart sunk as he saw their wild light. He had before noticed signs of high fever, and it was plain that the trouble was so far advanced that she was not wholly in her right mind.

"Who are you?" she peremptorily asked.

"Nobody but old Daddy Gray," he meekly said.

"Gray! Gray! I don't know you; I never saw you before. Are you one who chased me over the mountain?"

"Oh! dear, no; I didn't chase you. I wouldn't harm you anyway. I found you at the foot of a pile of rocks, over which I suppose you fell, and I brought you here. I am a friend."

The woman started up on her elbow.

"I see, I see!" she cried. "Well, it's good to have one friend, for all the rest are enemies. They chased me over the mountain and I ran—until I fell over the cliff. Old man, swear to me that they shall not take me."

"They shall not; no one shall touch you," he soothingly said.

"Beware of them, beware! They are cunning as serpents. Watch over me, or they'll steal in and take me away."

"No, they shall not!" Daddy firmly said. "I'm old, but I can fight. And you—you—What did you say was your name?"

She brushed her hand across her forehead.

"I don't know, do you? Let me think! I had a name, but it is gone. Let me think! Hal I think it was Agatha—Agatha—what was the rest? Bah! what does it matter? What's in a name? I wish I could lose mine and lose myself. Old man, do you hear them?"

"Whom, child?"

"My enemies."

"No; there is no one near except ourselves. Have no fear; I will watch over you and guard you."

"Beware of them, for they are cunning as wolves. They will come creeping up to the door—creep—creep— Old man, what makes my head feel so queer?"

"You need rest. Lie down on the pillow and keep very quiet, and you will soon be well."

He saw the fire of delirium in her eyes, but at the touch of his hand she grew quieter and drank the mixture he offered her without questioning.

His hand remained on her head, and with her eyes fixed on his, she sank back and lay motionless. He saw that he was exerting an influence over her troubled spirit, and he continued to caress her forehead and temples until her great eyes closed and she sunk into a composed slumber.

Then Daddy Gray started up and breathed a sigh which was almost a moan.

"What is the matter with me?" he muttered.

"Why does my head feel so strange? What is

there in the face of this girl which makes my poor brain grasp again at the past? This girl formed a link in my old life—but, no; she is herself young; it is but a resemblance, a deception, a dream. I never saw her before. But the name she spoke—what of that? Agatha, Agatha! How it makes my head whirl! It connects with my past, and I feel that I ought to like her, just as I felt that I ought to hate Cephas Brown. Agatha! Oh! if I could only remember; but my head whisks—I am dizzy!"

He sunk into a chair and covered his face with his hands, and the sunlight crept in through the sashless window and fell brightly on his gray head, and on the couch of the invalid, impartial with the strange couple.

CHAPTER XX.

GRAVEYARD GULCH.

HORACE LINCOLN awaited the hour at which he was to meet Vivian Brown with ill-concealed impatience, all of which, thanks to the matters on Barranca Bill's own mind, passed unnoticed.

Whatever compunctions Horace had at first felt in regard to his course—and they were never large—had entirely vanished before his golden dreams of the future: dreams in which he saw himself a rich man, able to shake the base dust of Nevada from his lofty feet and seek more congenial fields in the East.

He had skillfully led Barranca Bill to speak of the Browns, and this confirmed Vivian's statement that her father was wealthy, so Horace resolved to strain every nerve toward the one great object.

In so doing, he was aware that he would have to steer his bark with wondrous skill to avoid the rocks which lined the channel; the lynchers might drop upon him, or his brother and Vivian discover his game, or the mysterious Agatha appear in a Banquo fashion; but his later life had been full of risks taken and he would not hesitate.

Consequently, as the hour of the meeting at Graveyard Gulch appeared, and he sat talking lightly with his brother, he thought not of the rascality of the deception he was about to commit, but how he could best carry it through.

Seen together, the resemblance between the brothers did not seem so remarkably strong; though the difference lay more in their manner than elsewhere.

Barranca Bill had been a grave, earnest child, and he was a grave, earnest man. Uniformly kind and pleasant when well used, he was apt to fall into a dry humor when happy, but even then his face remained grave.

Horace, as we have seen, was a badly frightened man when he first appeared to William, driven by the lynchers, but with the imminent danger past he relapsed into gayety which seemed almost a mockery of his situation, and his careless laugh when his brother mentioned the men shot at Ramrod Bar would have angered a less patient man than Barranca Bill.

In order to get out and keep the appointment with Vivian, Horace had asked for a chance to sleep alone, and having been assigned to just the chamber he wished, he made a pretense of retiring early.

Ten minutes afterward his light was extinguished, but, immediately after, he leaped from the window and started at a swinging pace toward Graveyard Gulch.

Before the venture he had told himself that, if seen, it would be easy enough to pass himself off for Barranca Bill, but his danger seemed to increase at every step and, though well armed, he was heartily glad when the grim outlines of Graveyard Gulch appeared before him.

The place was well named. Nature had evidently been in a frolicsome mood when forming the gulch, for rocks were thrown together in the wildest confusion, though it was from a few that were fairly regular, and of slab-like form that it took its name.

It was a dark and forbidding place, and Horace did not wonder Vivian hesitated about making it the spot for meeting. He even hesitated and shivered himself, and, somehow, the nearest slab of rock seemed to turn to a real grave-stone and bear the name of Square Rob, the man who was shot at Ramrod Bar.

He uttered a curse at his folly in indulging in such an absurd fancy, but at that moment a sound behind him caused him to turn and see Vivian advancing.

He went to meet her.

"Am I late?" she asked.

"I have but just arrived. I was admiring the romantic beauties of the place," he answered.

"Romantic! Then there is a romance in a real graveyard. But, never mind, Mr. Lincoln, let us proceed to business. Have you learned anything, as yet, concerning the mysterious Agatha?"

"I may as well say no, though my detectives are on several clews. They are out in every direction, and I have news from Virginia City that my agent there has enlisted one of the best of San Francisco detectives, by means of telegraph and other things."

The grace with which the man lied was remarkable.

"Is it possible?" said Vivian, surprised. "I did not expect so much for several days to come."

Her sensible view of the case reminded him that, though he had not stated an impossibility, it would be just as well in future not to ascribe any wonderful qualifications to his imaginary detective force.

"Pluck and sagacity can make a good deal of show," he said, with becoming modesty, "but our riddle is not yet solved. When we have found this Agatha, and discovered just who she is, then we may well exult."

"And you think this probable?"

Vivian asked the question as a woman will of a man she believes to be wise by both nature and worldly experience, little suspecting what a libel on Barranca Bill was this man by her side.

"My detectives are sure of it. Perhaps they are over-confident, but something tells me it will end well."

"Since seeing you," said Vivian, slowly, "I have been almost alarmed at my boldness in seeking you. I said to myself, then, that you were a business man, one whom all trusted, one capable of leading in this work as I knew you to be leading in others, but I did not reflect that these very things weigh against your wasting your time on my affairs."

"Miss Brown!" cried Horace, reproachfully.

"I am frank."

"You are unkind. If you knew the pleasure with which I devote myself to the work, the happiness it gives me to serve you—that is—I—Pardon me, Miss Brown, but I have taken an interest in this case and I am going to see it right through to the end."

It was a cunning speech. His assumed confusion, and the words he uttered, could not but be understood by an intelligent woman; and then he seemed to struggle out of the web and end in a manner of bluff frankness.

"You are very kind," said Vivian.

"Consider me a soldier, to fight well for a cause I espouse," he said, laughing. "But, enough of nonsense. I suppose you have heard nothing new?"

"Nothing at all, but my father watches the mail closely, and I believe he is expecting news from this mysterious Agatha."

"Providing he is really to take a wife instead of a daughter, you have still no idea as to his motive?"

"None, except my suspicion that there is a mystery in his past life, and that he is afraid to acknowledge a wife. Oh! Mr. Lincoln, it makes me miserable to plot against him, for I love him dearly, but I feel that it is my duty to uphold my rights."

"Perfectly correct. No one can condemn your course."

"Thanks, for your sympathy, and now I think I had better return to the house. Graveyard Gulch always seemed a dreadful place to me, and a long stay would upset my nerves."

"Let us walk toward the village while we say our good-night words."

They went, unconscious of the fact that they had gone but a few paces when a man arose among the rocks and looked after them with a scowl.

It was Luke Gridley.

"So!" he muttered, disconsolately, "I no sooner get a position where I can listen nicely than they arise and go forth in the land. Confound them! they have no respect for my feelings. I have, however, learned one thing of importance. Vivian Brown and Mr. Barranca Bill hold secret interviews by night. Good; there is a love affair, of course. I suppose the venerable Brown, who is my honored sire, frowns on the young dream. So much the better for you, Luke Gridley. Perhaps you can make a gain for yourself, by-and-by, by giving the whole business away. I'll follow the turtle-doves!"

Neither Vivian nor Horace looked around, so they were unconscious of the skulking form behind them.

"I must once more impress upon your mind the need of caution," said Horace. "We must not let even a village rough suspect we are acting in concert, and, as I said before, if we chance to meet in the village, we must not mention, or hint, at our secret business."

"At Graveyard Gulch we will be allies; in other places we will meet as mere acquaintances."

"Very good," said Horace, in delight.

Having gone as far together as was advisable, they separated and walked rapidly away.

"Not being able to divide myself," soliloquized Gridley, "I must pick my mutton and see it through. I'll follow the festive Barranca Bill. I mistrust that fellow, and if I was in Dame Hecate's shoes, I'd pitch him into the drink. Who knows but what it was he who was nosing around the Weeping Willows last night?"

It was a new theory with Mr. Gridley, but he rejected it after a pause.

"The idea won't wash. Barranca Bill has to meet Vivian secretly, which shows that the venerable Brown is down on him; so, of course, said Brown did not take him along as a pard last night. I'd give a dollar to know who shot out the lights."

He chuckled as he remembered the frantic rage of Hecate after the saloon episode. Desiring Cephas Brown for future use she had not been sorry he escaped, but she not only had her liths demolished and Joe Darwin left lifeless on her hands, but she had seen that men could outwit her and enter the Weeping Willows.

Horace made his way to his brother's house and regained his chamber, where he sat down to reflect.

"Score one more for me. The fair Vivian is mighty amiable, and if all goes well I'll turn her friendship into love. This done, lo! the heiress is mine. My greatest fear is that if she should meet Bill she would forget my caution and give the business dead away. Should she say to him 'When we were in Graveyard Gulch, together,' and so forth, the fat would be in the fire. It's a risky game."

You are right, Mr. Horace Lincoln, and you may yet find that luck sometimes hits home to those who forget all the claims of gratitude. Yet, Fate plays its cards without a thought of the trump, and all too often, Rascality wins its game.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE HISTORY OF AGATHA.

THE Honorable Mr. Brown had just finished his breakfast the following morning when Kate, the servant, announced a "party" to see him.

Cephas had been somewhat nervous since his adventure at the Weeping Willows—not knowing that Hecate was the ally of Luke Gridley, and favorably disposed toward his continuing his mortal life, he every moment expected to see her on his trail—and he looked up quickly.

"A 'party' to see me?"

"Yes, an' a n'a'e-looking tramp he is, too, if me eyes does not desave me. A judge would hang him on the strength av his face."

It was not the Witch, then, and Mr. Brown pushed past Kate and entered the sitting-room. There he found a young man whose face was certainly ill-favored, but he had just got inside of a new suit of cheap clothing and looked tolerably respectable.

"This byar is ther Honorable Mr. Brown, I take it, sir," he said, arising and bowing awkwardly.

"Such is my name, and I am now at your service, my dear sir."

Cephas was now at his ease, for his visitor's manner preached the doctrine of peace plainly.

"You are a lawyer, I b'lieve."

"Such was my calling before I became a member of the Nevada Legislature, sir, and I still practice a little."

Cephas had bestowed himself in a chair and was trying hard to look like a great man.

"What'll yer ask fur advisin' me?"

"Are you a voter in Comet Camp?"

"Oh! yes, sir."

"Well, if your case can be won in court I'll fix a figure after hearing it; otherwise, there will be no charge. I do not forget my constituents."

"Tain't a case in court; leastwise, not in Nevada. I'll give ther hull story. My name is Steve Tyler, though fur ther last year I've been called Abe Neal. Ther five afore that I was in prison in California."

"Indeed!"

"Yas; I don't deny it, an' though I ain't proud on't, I kin say I served ther five year out, slick an' squar'."

"Having thus atoned, your hands are as white as those of the men who put you there."

A wolfish look crossed Neal's face.

"Who d'ye s'pose put me thar?"

"I don't know," said Cephas, a little startled.

"My pard, old man, my pard. Listen! Thar was a big job put up thar ter burglarize a house an' it was did. I was in it, but I was only a tool. My pard, Ben Warren, did ther biz, along with a woman who was one o' ther neatest pickpockets and confidence females California ever see'd. All ther ropes was laid afore I was let inter ther secret—the two laid 'em—Ben Warren an' ther woman—an' then, 'cause a second man was actually necessary, they took me in. Wal, ther job was did, an' ther money got away with, but ther man o' ther house woked up an' Ben Warren give him a clip over his head that laid him up fur a month."

"A serious job for Warren."

"Fur me, yer mean, fur when ther detectives got on ther track an' Ben an' Agatha saw how twur goin' ter eend, what did they do but go ter ther authorities an' swear my life away."

"Ben and who?" questioned Brown, sharply.

"Agatha. She was our female pard."

"Agatha who?"

Mr. Brown had become suddenly interested.

"She went under ther name o' Agatha Draem. It may hev be'n her'n, an' it may not."

"This was in California, six years ago, you say?"

"Yes."

"Describe this Agatha."

"Wal, she was young, but she was hefty. How old she was, I dunno. Her face said sixteen, her form said twenty-five, an' she was way up in ther king-row in villainy. She had

fine brown hair, hazel eyes an' an innocent baby-face, so that nobody would take her ter be a case o' ther kind she was. Oh! she was a stunner; I'll say that, if she did swear her work onter me, an' bottle me up fur five year. Do ye think ye know her?"

Mr. Brown had been rubbing his chin nervously.

"Had she lost the sight of one eye?" he asked.

"No; they was as bright as stars."

"Then I don't know her. Agatha Draem—that's a romantic name. How much do you know about her?"

"Next ter nothin', except that she was Ben Warren's pard; though I do remember he said they called her 'the Cricket' in 'Frisco when she was workin' the pocket-book racket."

Cephas shifted his position uneasily.

"So these two persons swore your life away. They threw all the blame on your shoulders, and sent you to prison for five years?"

"Yes; I was ther victim in ther case. They planned it, got ther spoils an' then went cl'ar."

"An infamous piece of work."

"Right you be; an' now I want ter ask a question. If I was ter go an'sw'ar out a statement, would ther law take notice on't an' bottle the n' up?"

"Decidedly not," said the Honorable Mr. Brown, hastily. "Your word would weigh as nothing in the case. By serving your term you paid the debt for all, and a convict's word don't go far, anyway."

"But shouldn't ther guilty be punished?" Neal asked, surlily.

"Certainly, but in this case the law is baffled. I wish you well, my dear sir, I certainly do; but these people have won the game past recall."

"Then," hissed the man, "I'll take ther law inter my own hands!"

Brown again started, and a troubled look crossed his face.

"Do you know where they are?" he asked.

"I lost sight o' them both while I was in prison, an' Agatha, ther Cricket, may now be dead fur all I know, but I kin put my finger on Ben Warren any minute."

"Then he is near here?"

"Right in Comet Camp."

"I don't know any one of that name."

Neal hesitated for a moment, and his eyes were fixed on Brown's face as though he would read his thoughts. He felt a strong desire to speak plainly, to make known his intentions, but it might not be safe. Suddenly, however, he decided.

"I reckon you know him well, for he is a big gun at Comet Camp. Men sneeze when he takes snuff an' git down on their knees at his say-so. He ain't called Ben Warren now, though—he is Barranca Bill."

The ex-convict hissed out the words, and his fingers opened and shut as though he had the neck of his enemy in his grasp. From the hour when he encountered Barranca Bill at the Weeping Willows and, rightfully or wrongfully, took him to be Ben Warren, it had been his ruling passion to take revenge for his long incarceration.

Once more Cephas Brown was amazed.

"Barranca Bill!" he echoed.

"Yas, that's him."

"Are you sure?"

"I'll swear to it."

"And this man was once the partner of Agatha—of the woman you call Agatha Draem?"

"Her very name."

Had Abe Neal been less absorbed in his plans of revenge, he would have seen that the Honorable Mr. Brown was very much excited. He brushed his hand across his forehead to remove the gathering perspiration, and it was plain that he had a personal interest in the narrative.

Neal had turned his gaze to the bleak mountain side visible outside the window, and Brown surveyed him closely, marking the sinister, determined cast of his features.

"You say you will have revenge," he said, softly.

"Yas, an' it'll be quicker'n ther lawan'surer. I'll shoot Ben Warren—Barranca Bill—like ther dog he is. Oh! I'll hev pay fur what I suffered."

A new light leaped into Brown's eyes.

"I can not blame you, my dear sir," he said, in an oily tone, "and if any trouble comes to you, I'll defend you without charging you a cent. I believe in human justice, and as this man has wronged you so foully, I advise you to make way with him surely, silently, swiftly!"

"And then fur ther woman—fur Agatha!" cried Neal, excitedly.

Brown's face fell.

"Remember she is a woman."

"A tigress, ther ally o' Ben Warren in wreckin' my life. Oh! she'll be a lively 'Cricket' ef she gets out o' my hands."

"But you say you don't know where she is."

"Fate'll send us together sometime."

The Honorable Mr. Brown did not reply, but gazing at vacancy, stroked his chin softly and reflected with a furtive light in his eyes.

Unknown to either man, a third pair of ears had overheard their conversation; just outside the door Vivian Brown had heard all that was said, and through a crevice she had been able to

view her father's face and read his passing thoughts as Abe Neal did not think of doing.

Her honorable and sensitive nature rebelled at the idea of playing the listener, but, convinced that Brown intended some dishonorable act, she had nerve herself to meet him on his own ground, repugnant as was the work.

Thus, she had heard the history of Agatha, so far as Abe Neal knew it, and as she marked her father's emotion, she could not doubt but what Abe referred to the same woman Brown intended to bring to Comet Camp and place at the head of his household.

"Agatha, the Cricket," a pickpocket, confidence woman, accomplice of burglars and, the Lord only knew what else.

The revelation removed her scruples in the case, but she looked less calmly on that part of the story which referred to Barranca Bill. He had always been called the squarest man in Comet Camp; now, he was charged with being a burglar.

Again, if he was Ben Warren, she had—as she believed—gone straight to the man who had in the old days been the accomplice of Agatha, to seek an ally to aid her in her present warfare against the said Agatha.

"I do not believe it; I will not believe it!" she thought. "There is some mistake. Barranca Bill is not the villain Abe Neal has pictured."

There was little more to be said between Brown and his visitor, and when that little had been attended to, Abe went out and made his way back to the Weeping Willows.

At the same time Cephas was thinking rapidly.

"By Jupiter! this is the most fortunate occurrence," he muttered. "Only for this warning, I should have brought Agatha to Comet Camp and so have exposed all to this Barranca Bill. So he was once a favorite of hers? Well, that settles his case, and he must speedily die. Abe Neal will attend to him. This warning was most timely, for though it is clear Agatha and Bill have lost sight of each other, the fellow's tongue would doubtless wag if he found out who my putative daughter really was. Mr. Barranca Bill must die!"

At the same moment, Vivian was in her own room and getting pen, paper and ink ready.

"Barranca Bill must be saved, and as it will not do to wait, I'll write to him."

She superscribed an envelope to "MR. WILLIAM LINCOLN," but as she drew the paper toward her, paused suddenly.

She had remembered the strict injunction not to communicate with her ally in any way, or at any time, except at Graveyard Gulch.

Long she sat with her pen poised above the paper, but at last she laid it aside. She would obey her ally's direction.

How much trouble the sending of the letter would have prevented!

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DEATH-SONG IN THE MOUNTAINS.

BARRANCA BILL did not for any great length of time forget Helen Neville. He had championed her cause under circumstances which would have made most men her enemies. She had claimed him as her husband, and had drawn a revolver to shoot him, and yet he was working for her as devotedly as though she had been his sister.

In so doing he was actuated by two motives—to find and convince her that he was not the Donald Lander who had trifled with her affections, and to aid a helpless woman who had fallen among thieves.

He had no positive information concerning her after the time when she appeared to claim him as her husband. The lynchers knew some young woman had spoken for the Witch of the Weeping Willows when they were about to hang her, but their excitement was so great that they would not swear to her identity.

Next, the "Lambs" of Hecate's den told of a lovely girl who had appeared and sung to them, and it was believed she had afterward been taken away from the place.

By these signs Barranca Bill believed he could trace Helen Neville, but there was no further clew. Sheriff Sharpe had done his best—and he was willing to swear no girl was inside the Weeping Willows—but all his efforts had failed to gain further information.

We have heard William Lincoln say that the den of the Lambs should be carefully watched. This resolution was kept. He called to his aid several reliable men, and the infamous place was watched day and night—so far, without any developments.

It will also be remembered that after Barranca Bill saw Cephas Brown at the Weeping Willows, he gained a suspicion. The politician had denied all knowledge of Helen, but her champion suspected that he knew more than he was telling.

Further reflection caused him to wonder if Brown had not rescued, or captured, the girl from Hecate, and, fearing her for some unknown reason, confined her somewhere among the mountains.

This idea caused him to place a watch over the Honorable Mr. Brown, and the first result was seen when, a few hours later than the scene

of our last chapter, he went down to Gentle John's bowling-alley.

The genial John was sitting on a stool, smoking, and Bad Lung was brushing some invisible particles of dust from the alley.

"How do you do?" saluted Barranca Bill, brusquely.

"I'm right well, pard. Pins all up an' in order, an' plenty o' cash in ther box. Bad Lung, bring a stool."

"Me setee 'em up for 'Melican man," the Celestial said, basting to execute the order.

"You're worth your weight in gold," said Bill, carelessly.

Bad Lung's eyes dilated.

"Mebbe 'Melican man wantee buyee," he said.

"Oh! you git out!" said Gentle John. "Go an' shoot yourself. No; hyar is work fur you."

He rolled a ball with such accuracy that six pins went down in a heap.

"Mo setee 'em up ag'in," said Bad Lung, cheerfully.

"Pard," said John, "I war jest a-comin' ter see yer."

"Is there news?"

"Old Brown has ordered his hoss ter be got ready at dark."

"At dark?"

"Yes."

"Good enough! That means business. The man who idles around in Comet Camp all day, and then goes for a ride by night, has secret work in hand. You are right in thinking this a clew."

"I thought you would want ter set 'em up on that game. I hev an idee ther gal will be founded."

And this explains why, when Cephas Brown left Comet Camp a little after dark and rode along the trail toward Ramrod Bar, another horseman—Barranca Bill—dropped in just behind him and rode along quietly, keeping just near enough to watch the politician.

It does not, however, explain why three other riders appeared on the trail, dropping into line in Barranca Bill's rear, and we must state that the foremost of the trio was Abe Neal, in order that the reader may understand that there was a prospect of warm work among the mountains before the night grew old.

Barranca Bill did not allow himself to sleep in his saddle, nor to fix all his attention on Brown, and it was not long before he became aware that there were horsemen in his rear.

The fact was simple enough in itself, for it was no strange thing for men to ride along the trail by night, but his situation was such that he viewed them with some suspicion, and the feeling increased as he saw how exactly they kept their distance.

"I see!" he said, with a frown. "Either Cephas Brown takes a body-guard wherever he goes, or else he feared pursuit on this particular occasion. Confound the dogs! I wish lightning would strike them! I can easily get away from them, but in the meanwhile Brown will get away from me. What shall I do?"

The novel procession was approaching the wildest part of the trail. The way was through deep gulches, at the foot of cliffs or on the brink of precipices. Nature was there seen in her most wayward mood, and the piled-up masses of rock looked like the ruins of a limitless castle.

The trio under Abe Neal began to quicken their pace and close in on Barranca Bill, and he was not slow to see and comprehend their movements.

"They intend to attack, perhaps to murder me, and once in the difficult trail ahead they will drive me to the pinch. I have a choice of three things; to yield tamely, to fight, or to hide and let them pass."

His grim smile showed that he had no fears, but after a little reflection he rode to one side of the trail and paused in a niche.

The men came on briskly, for Abe Neal—he was working independently of Brown and bent on revenge—had resolved to bring matters to a crisis at once, and as Barranca Bill patted the neck of his horse, to keep him quiet, they swept past without suspecting that he had fallen out of line.

On they went, and as the gulch grew deeper the darkness became intense, much to Neal's disgust, but he urged forward his horse until it was at a gallop.

For some time the rattling of their horses' hoofs had been the only sound audible, but a deeper, heavier sound, like the prolonged boom of a cannon, heralded the approach of a shower.

The night bade fair to be wild in more ways than one.

Suddenly, Neal again caught the outlines of a horseman in advance, and he brightened until a closer survey showed him that it was Cephas Brown, not Barranca Bill.

He dashed forward and joined the politician, who first presented a revolver and then grew calm on recognizing Neal.

"Has any one passed you?" the latter abruptly asked.

"No."

"Then, where ther blazes is he?"

"To whom do you refer?"

"Barranca Bill. He has followed you all

the way from Comet Camp, an' we hev folled him, but though he has be'n 'twixt us all ther while, he give us ther slip in ther pass."

Mr. Brown was confused and excited, and the fact that he did not reply at once showed that his mind was unusually busy.

Remembering that Neal had said Barranca Bill was really Ben Warren, the ex-confederate of Agatha Draem, he saw a deep menace in the fact that the man had followed him from the town.

Did this Ben Warren still know all about Agatha, and, knowing that he—Brown—intended to bring her to the village, did he intend to commit some dark deed which should prevent it?

If Warren and Agatha had quarreled, the former would not hesitate to kill the man who would raise her to a comfortable position.

Worse than all the rest, Brown was that night out on a mission where he wanted no one with him—least of all, Abe Neal.

"What can be done?" he nervously asked, breaking the silence at last.

"Hark!"

Neal need not have given the caution, for, out upon the night air, rung the clear notes of a wild song, and a horse was heard advancing along the gulch.

"It's Barranca Bill!" hissed Neal. "Quick! take shelter among ther rocks an' shoot him when he comes. Ther singin' will guide our bullets!"

If Abe had stopped to consider a moment, he would not have felt so sure of his position. He knew Barranca Bill to be a shrewd, brave man, and the fact that he was thus waking the mountain echoes indicated some under-current.

The singing continued, but the life-hunter suddenly raised his head and began to peer into the darkness in a dissatisfied manner.

"Ther durned critter has stopped; gone inter camp under ther shadder o' ther cliff, I do b'lieve. Mister—"

He turned to look for Brown, but that gentleman was not visible. He had taken advantage of the pause to slip away in the darkness and part company from companions he did not then desire.

"Let him go!" growled Neal. "He ain't nothin' ter us, an' I reckon we hev Barranca Bill on ther hip. Leave yer hosses hyar an' foller me, pard. Ther varmint has camped, an' we'll steal up soft an' slow an' drop him afore he s'pects mischief. Come on!"

There was no opposition, and with their revolvers held ready for use, the trio began creeping from rock to rock, nearing the singer as the tiger steals on his prey.

Barranca Bill seemed in a happy mood, and his clear voice never wavered once as he poured forth the melody which seemed likely to be his last.

Nearer and nearer crept the assassins, until, at last, they perceived a dark form seated on a rock, and the words of the song still pouring out steadily.

"Now!" hissed Neal. "Cover his heart an' fire tergether!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN THE STORM.

IT was no easy target offered the assassin, but they had practiced shooting in all kinds of weather, and as Abe Neal gave the word their revolvers rung out together.

Simultaneously with the report the singing ceased, and the dark figure toppled off the rock, while the snort of Barranca Bill's horse was followed by a flash of lightning and a boom of thunder.

The temporary light revealed Abe Neal and his allies bounding forward to finish their work, if, indeed, there was anything to do; but as they moved something unexpected must have occurred, for, one after another, they dropped to the ground and lay quite still.

Then, up from behind the rock sprung Barranca Bill, and with his revolver firmly grasped, he strode to the side of his would-be assassins.

The trio lay perfectly still.

"All down but nine!"

The words arose behind the superintendent, and he wheeled quickly, though the words and the voice told him there was no danger.

The burly form of Gentle John loomed up in the darkness.

"I reckon we've bowled 'em off ther alley," he calmly added.

"Well, by thunder! this is a surprise; but you are none the less welcome. I have an idea you helped me in this game, though the thunder drowned all other sounds."

"Correct; but let me look at these hyar critters."

They looked. Two were forever past mischief, and the third lay quite still, though his heart and pulse were in good condition.

Barranca Bill's trap had worked to perfection. Convinced that he must have trouble with the men, he had made a pretense of camping, but while they were creeping forward, lured by his singing, he had crouched behind the rock on which he had placed a dummy to deceive them.

Then, after they had fired, he began work in turn, and, aided by Gentle John, had won the battle.

"Have you a horse?" abruptly asked Bill.

"Yas."

"Mount at once, then. Cephas Brown is just ahead, and our only hope of learning his present business is to follow at once. I fear it is too late already."

They leaped into the saddle and clattered along the pass just as a vigorous dash of rain came as the vanguard of the storm. It was seldom that storms visited that region, but when they did it was in a business way, and the riders felt a little uneasy as a rush of wind came through the gap, and the thunder and lightning played their part overhead.

Despite all this, Barranca Bill asked his ally how he chanced to be there, and the latter told how he had seen the trio fall into place behind Bill, and suspecting their object, had followed at their heels.

His coming was welcome, if not more.

For a quarter of a mile the two rode on as fast as possible, though without seeing any sign of Brown, and then they struck a more level part of the gap and met a wind which was not to be braved.

No horse could stand against it for ten minutes.

Without losing any time they rode into a cross gulch and took refuge under the nose of a cliff. Bill had abandoned all thoughts of again seeing Brown and they only desired the storm to pass away so that they could return to Comet Camp.

As though for their especial accommodation, the wind and rain soon began to abate, though thunder and lightning were uncommonly vivid, and they were thinking of starting forth on their return when an unexpected sight was vouchsafed them.

Barranca Bill was a man who never allowed himself to be caught napping in a time of danger, and in closely watching the vicinity, he now and then glanced toward the top of the opposite cliff.

Thus it was that when he once again took advantage of a lightning flash, he saw a woman standing on the top of the rocky monument of nature—we use no figure of speech, for to him it seemed for an instant as though he was looking on a statue.

The white light of the electric flash contrasted with her dark apparel, and with her hair and shawl blowing in the wind, she looked at once romantic and weird.

He grasped Gentle John's arm and with the other hand pointed upward.

Again flashed the lightning—a long, hovering gleam—and both saw the woman. She stood as before, near the edge of the cliff, and one would almost have said she enjoyed the war of the elements; but nearly in the same breath a man appeared behind her, his arms were thrown around her form and she disappeared from view.

"Cephas Brown!" exclaimed Barranca Bill.

"An' ther gal was her—was Helen Neverill; I'll sw'ar to it!" said Gentle John, excitedly.

Bill started.

"By Jupiter! you may be right, and I am not sure but there is being a murder committed. Quick! John, we can scale that cliff a little to the right; follow me!"

They darted away, leaving their horses, and the ascent was begun. By day it was nothing particularly dangerous, and it might now have been easily done had they taken time, but their impatience would not allow them to wait for the lightning flashes and they urged each other on in a wild and perilous scramble.

Barranca Bill had not been impressed by a resemblance between the woman and Helen Neville, but as he had believed that Cephas Brown had gone out to visit the girl, it was not hard to believe he was murdering her on the cliff.

Panting and nearly exhausted, they at last reached the top. Again flashed the lightning, but it showed them a bare, nearly level surface which ended on two sides at the crescent-shaped cliff's top and on the other in a ravine.

Clearly the man and woman must have gone in that direction.

"Set 'em up ag'in!" said Gentle John, moving forward at once.

Two long bounds took Bill to his side, and they ran to the edge of the ravine. Again the lightning flashed, and they used their eyes as best they could, but it was all to no purpose; not a human being was visible.

"It's no use to plunge headlong into that ravine," said Bill, disconsolately. "In such darkness an elephant could bide from us, and we would break our legs before we went three rods. They know of a path somewhere, and by that way they have gone."

"Our best holt is ter stay right hyar an' use our eyes when ther lightnin' pops," said Gentle John.

There was really no choice in the matter, and they waited accordingly; but though the electricity did its part, they saw nothing more of interest.

"All down but one!" John finally muttered

in a melancholy tone. "We are beat, we be."

"I do not give up so easily. I am inclined to think there is a cabin near here, in which Miss Neville is living. Let us start out and search carefully, so as to break no bones, and if we find our game, get an explanation of the whole case before we leave."

They did as he said; but at the end of an hour, once more stood upon the flat rock. They had made the search without finding a human being or a trace of a human habitation.

"I reckon they are all down now," said Gentle John, mournfully.

"We are baffled, that is certain."

"Thar is one good thing."

"And that?"

"Ther lightnin' is dryin' my clothes." And John spread out his hand as though to catch a fancied heat.

Barranca Bill was not in a mood for jesting, and he remained looking thoughtfully off across the range.

The storm had practically ceased. The rain had passed away some time before, the wind had ceased to blow, except gently, and the electric flashes were less frequent.

The night's work was far from being satisfactory, though this was not because of a lack of zeal on their part. What had become of the people seen on the rock? That one of them was Brown he felt positive, and Gentle John affirmed that the other was Helen Neville; but in any case, their disappearance was mysterious.

An exclamation from John caused him to turn.

"Durnation! what does this mean?"

The elder man was pointing to the rock almost at his feet, and as another flash of lightning came Barranca Bill saw a dark, liquid pool in a little hollow, the nature of which could not be mistaken.

"Blood!" muttered Gentle John.

The two men looked each other in the face.

"By my life, there has been murder done here!" exclaimed Bill. "It was indeed a tragedy, of which we saw the first part, and that man killed the woman he thus surprised."

"Then we've got the bulge on Ceph Brown."

"We can swear to nothing."

"Swear ter nothin'" shouted Gentle John. "I'll sw'ar ter every crime in ther stature ef Helen Neverill bes be'n merlested. Howlin' hosannas! I'll walk inter Ceph Brown with a hull arsenal o' weepers an' blow him ter everlastin' smash!"

"Gently, John, gently!"

"Ain't I allays gentle?—spell it with a g. O' course I am. But, see hyer, pard, ther buddy may be stowed away in a niche. Let us look."

They did so; but in the fast-fading light from the heavens the work was in vain, and they finally decided that they had better return to Comet Camp, and send Sheriff Sharpe with a posse early in the morning.

They rode homeward in a thoughtful mood.

Neither had a doubt but what a murder had been perpetrated on the cliff, and if their eyesight had not been strangely deceptive, it was Cephas Brown's hand that had driven home the knife.

Again and again Barranca Bill asked himself if Helen Neville had really been the victim; but there was no way of solving the mystery. The mystery! According to his view, the air was full of mystery; it stalked through the streets of Comet Camp hand in hand with crime, and each day increased the cloud.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AGATHA IS MENTIONED.

SOON after daybreak the following morning, Sheriff Sharpe started for the scene of the tragedy, guided by Gentle John; but they returned at noon without having a single success to their credit.

However dark the deed on the cliff had been, there was no sign left to tell of it except the dried blood-stains, and Sheriff Sharpe did not hesitate to say that the whole affair had been a "romantic notion," and that he should mix no more with it.

"That Barranca Bill has kept me runnin' arter this female fur a week, an' all fur nothin'. I'm goin' ter quit right hyar, an' it's my opinion Bill is crazy."

"Mebbe you think I'm crazy, too," suggested Gentle John, belligerently.

"Either crazy or a fool," Sharpe confessed.

What occurred next was never reported twice alike; but the spectators were unanimously of the opinion that none but white men would have shaken hands so cordially, and have set 'em up so freely for the crowd, as did Gentle John and Mr. Sharpe right after their rough-and-tumble battle, and it is also worthy of record that, instead of serving a warrant on John for assault, the sheriff appointed him his deputy within the hour, and the two were fast friends.

Barranca Bill had kept his eye on Brown's house during the forenoon without discovering anything; but there was one circumstance which naturally escaped his notice.

Cephas received a letter from Luke Gridley, who claimed to be his son, and it was of such a menacing nature that he devoted a good deal of

time to considering how he could get rid of the pertinacious claimant.

If Gridley was to be believed—and Cephas was very much afraid' that the young man, despite his hang-dog face, was telling the truth—something had got to be done right away or the Honorable Mr. Brown would be in much the same position as a once-fast trotter with an incurable lameness—off the track and posted from the glory of his past achievements.

Various persons were interesting themselves by trying to learn all about Cephas. Luke Gridley, Barranca Bill, Vivian and Daddy Gray each held a thread, and if luck ever wound them in one it would be bad for Cephas; but there had been things in his life of which none of them seemed to know.

Many a subtle plot had he planned and executed, and with the greatest of all his schemes menaced, he set his teeth tightly together.

"Luke Gridley must die!"

It was not a very fatherly decision, but then Luke was in the way.

He must die!

And so the Honorable Mr. Brown, having burned the threatening letter, went out and held a brief interview with a man who existed in Comet Camp without any visible means of support, and when they separated Gridley's fate was settled as far as Brown could control it.

The latter did not fail to see Barranca Bill about the village, and he wondered how he had escaped Abe Neal and his allies, as well as what had become of Abe; but the matter was settled when, after dark, that ruffian made his appearance with head bandaged and his face pale and told of the affair in the pass.

"It was a durned trick o' Barranca Bill's!" hissed the ex-convict, "but I'm a-goin' fur him. His bullet just plowed a ridge along my skulp an' laid me over, and when I come to I was layin' between Snow and Perry, both on 'em stun'dead, an' ther blizzard howlin' around me. At first I wished I was dead, too, fur my head seemed bu'stin' an' my strength all gone; but suthin' seemed ter whisper in my ear ther word 'Vengeance!' an' I ariz from ther grave an' drawed myself like a maimed snake all ther way ter Comet Camp."

He paused for breath and Brown stared at him like one fascinated and paralyzed.

"I'm hyar now," continued Abe, "an' when I git my strength a bit, I'll look fur Barranca Bill! Yas, I'll look an' I'll find, an' then I'll t'ar his heart out—so!"

He raised his brawny hand and moved his fingers in a way which made Brown shudder, but the weakness soon passed.

"You are right, and as I don't love him, myself, I'll give you two hundred dollars the hour the deed is done."

"Your hand!"

The politician gave it without hesitation, and then a sickening smile crossed Neal's face.

"I work fur love an' money," he observed.

At that very moment Vivian was hesitating on the side of Graveyard Gulch. She had gone to meet her ally; she had been nervously anxious to see him, and yet the gloomy walls of the place made her shiver as usual.

Out of the shadows, however, came a human form.

"Mr. Lincoln!" exclaimed Vivian, joyfully.

"Otherwise known as Barranca Bill," was the laughing reply, and Horace claimed his false honors with his usual nonchalance. "You are as prompt as usual."

"I dare not be otherwise, for I would not be alone in Graveyard Gulch for a fortune. Bah! I am a coward. Let us now proceed to business."

Her erratic manner showed Horace that something unusual had occurred, and as Barranca Bill had been so much away he feared something serious.

"Do you know a man named Abe Neal?"

"No," he answered, after a slight pause.

"Well, I have heard him swear to kill you."

"To kill me!"

Horace was treading carefully. If any one had sworn vengeance, was it on Barranca Bill or the other Lincoln?

"Yes."

"And for what reason?"

"He says you sent him to the California State's Prison for five years by falsely swearing against him—you and a woman named Agatha Draem."

Horace bounded from the rock upon which he had been sitting.

"What?—who?" he excitedly demanded.

"Agatha Draem."

A dead silence followed, and in the darkness Vivian could not read her companion's face. That he was deeply moved by something was plain, but he rallied quickly.

"What nonsense!" he exclaimed. "I never heard of Agatha Draem, Abe Neal or—or of this affair; while as for sending Neal or any one else to the California prison, I was in Michigan, copper-mining, until four years ago, and I never was west of the Mississippi until then."

The emphatic declaration pleased and disappointed Vivian at one and the same time.

"I am very sorry on one account."

"What is that?"

"I believe it is this Agatha Draem my father intends to present as his daughter."

Again Horace started visibly.

"This is a coincidence of names," he acknowledged. "But no, no; Cephas Brown would never take her into his house. It is impossible—a woman that swore away another man's life—wasn't that what you said?"

"Yes. And by the way, Neal said your real name was Ben Warren."

"Rubbish! Who is he, and where is he? How did he get these notions into his head?"

"He said he was a stranger in Comet Camp, but that he saw you on the street and recognized you as Ben Warren."

"You are sure he meant me? There's a Tom Lincoln over in one of the mines—"

"He didn't say Lincoln; he referred to you as Barranca Bill."

His listener laughed lightly.

"It is all a blunder; a case of mistaken identity," he declared. "I never heard of this Abe Neal; he is deceived by a resemblance. Yet, since there is an Agatha in the case, you may as well tell me all as nearly as you can recollect it. I may gain some idea of the truth."

Vivian complied and gave a full account of the visit of Abe Neal to her father the previous day—little suspecting he was at that moment just finishing a second call—and with an excellent memory she gave the story the ex-convict had told.

Horace sat quietly through it all, trifling with a stone he held in his hands.

"Mr. Neal is away off," he said, as she finished, "for, as I before stated, I was in the Michigan copper mines five years ago. I could laugh at the affair were it not that you suspect this Agatha Draem is the other Agatha."

"Would you laugh to see Abe Neal after you with a belt-full of revolvers?"

"Bah!" said Horace, "I don't care a snap for that. Let him come on and I'll walk all over him. I've stood up before five men before now, and I reckon I won't tremble before one. As for revolvers, I put my shooting against that of any man in Nevada."

Horace desired to impress his companion with the idea that he was a hero, but for once he overstepped the mark. Miss Brown admired bravery but detested boasting, and as a result she abruptly changed the subject.

"How are your detectives succeeding?"

"Like all detectives. They have followed up every false clew in the State, so I now begin to think they will soon strike the right one."

"They must hasten, or this Agatha, who is poetically named the Cricket, will reach Comet Camp ahead of them."

"I'll basten the fellows."

The remainder of their conversation was uninteresting, and they soon left Graveyard Gulch and proceeded toward the village.

This time Luke Gridley was not around to act the spy, and, after saying good-night, Horace hastened toward his brother's house unwatched.

"By the foul flend!" he muttered, "this is a pretty state of affairs. So Abe Neal, alias Tyler, is in Comet Camp and looking for Ben Warren. I must keep my eyes open. And Cephas Brown's bird is Agatha, the Cricket! Ye gods! the old crowd is running together, and as I am cordially disliked by the Cricket, I may have a warm time between her and Abe. Moreover, I'm inclined to think Abe will make it warm for my worthy brother. Ha! an idea strikes me. Suppose Abe kills Bill, and is hanged for the deed, what is to prevent me from proving that the murdered man was Paul Pindar and myself stepping into the shoes of Barranca Bill? A huge idea. Ha! ha!"

CHAPTER XXV.

MATTERS BEGIN TO LOOK MIXED.

VIVIAN walked rapidly toward the village after leaving her late companion, but, somehow, her thoughts were not so much on herself as they had been for the last week.

"I don't understand Mr. Lincoln so well as I did, or, rather, so well as I thought I did. All Comet Camp praises his bravery, chivalry and modesty, and I thought him a remarkable man at our first meeting, but in Graveyard Gulch he has developed into an altogether different man. He is no longer modest, grave and earnest, but rather boastful, light-headed and—but no; he is my ally and I won't criticise him."

It was a praiseworthy resolution, but Vivian would have broken it had she known what her ally was then thinking.

She had nearly reached the edge of the village when, suddenly, two men sprung from behind a rock and seized her before she could take a step toward flight.

"Hold where you are, my lady!" cried one, with a coarse laugh. "What's ther use o' strugglin'? You're only a child in our hands an'—"

But Vivian had seen the strength of his assertion, and with all her power she sent forth a cry for help as only a woman can.

Before it could be repeated a broad hand closed over her mouth and a few scattered curses

fell from the lips of the ruffians. They had overlooked the probable and given her a chance for one cry, but they did not intend it should be repeated.

Without delay they began hastening away with her between them—their faces toward Graveyard Gulch—and her heart sunk. She tried to scream again, but the effort was a failure.

Suddenly, however, her strained ears caught the sound of a脚步声, a sharp crack followed and one of her captors released his hold and fell to the ground.

He had gone down under a terrific blow, and, seeing that danger was abroad, his companion put up his hands for defense, but the avening fist darted through the guard and he went down near his companion.

Both men remained motionless, each stunned by a single blow.

Vivian had bravely remained on the scene, and as she recognized her champion she uttered a little cry:

"Barranca Bill!"

"Miss Brown!" echoed the superintendent—for it was the genuine Barranca Bill this time; and there was deep surprise in his voice.

What could take the girl to so wild a place at that hour of the evening?

He lifted his hat politely, however.

"I am glad to have been of service to you, but if we wait for these fellows to recover, there will be fresh trouble. Unless your business calls you elsewhere, allow me to escort you home."

"I shall be glad enough to go. Those horribile men assailed me as I was hastening away, and I had almost despaired of help when you came. I am surprised, however, for I supposed you were in your house before now."

Bill smiled gravely.

"I suppose that is a reproof on keeping late hours. Well, I suppose I am justified in calling myself an early retirer, but business of importance kept me out to-night."

He spoke so gravely that Vivian, never suspecting he was not the man she had lately met at Graveyard Gulch, regarded it as a good joke, while his manner was so respectful that she began to wonder why she had thought him disagreeable.

"I need not ask if you have been to church, since Comet Camp don't possess one," she said.

"My business has been less agreeable than that," said Barranca Bill, almost curtly.

Vivian felt piqued. True, it was right to go to church, and she admired him all the more because he believed in going; but, somehow, her own company seemed to be referred to slightly.

"I wonder that you live where there is no church."

"I get good wages here, and prosperity will bring a church. I've seen both extremes, for mine has been a wandering life. I lived East until fourteen years of age, and then ran away; at fifteen I turned up in California where I remained seven years, gold-mining; then I went to Texas and acted the rascaman for two years, and four years ago I landed in Nevada. I've seen rough times and easy times, but all I desire now is to settle down and take life easy. I begin to feel old."

Barranca Bill seldom grew so confiding as this, but he was drawn toward Vivian Brown by the invisible bond of congeniality, and it overstepped his usual reserve.

Vivian, however, paid no attention to that. An hour before, when in Graveyard Gulch, the man she believed to be Barranca Bill had made an earnest assertion which was now overthrown.

"Why, I thought you said once, to-night, that you were never in California; and now you claim to have lived there for seven years."

"You must have misunderstood me the first time," said Bill, carelessly, "for I am an old Californian."

Vivian was amazed. Not yet suspecting that she had met a counterfeit Barranca Bill at the Gulch, she contrasted his assertion that he had never been in California, to clear himself of all connection with Abe Neal and Agatha, the Cricket, with the present avowal.

She let the matter pass and resolved to test him on another point.

"What sort of a place is Michigan?" she asked.

"I don't know," answered Bill, simply; "I was never there."

Another thunderbolt; the man at Graveyard Gulch had claimed to have labored for some time in the Michigan copper-mines.

"Permit me to ask where you were six years ago?" she continued sharply.

"I was in Texas," answered the superintendent politely, though clearly amazed at being so strangely addressed.

"William Lincoln, you are laughing at me!" she cried passionately. "Believe me, sir, I am not in a mood to relish jokes. Your contradictions are absurd enough, but they lack a good deal of being witty."

Barranca Bill looked at her in bewilderment.

"I reckon we had better call for new hands;

I haven't an ace, face or trump," he observed. "I don't understand a word you say. In what manner have I contradicted myself? Oh! I recollect, there was something mixed on the California business. Well, it was only a mistake; you misunderstood me, for I never denied having been there. Why, miss, it was there they gave me my sobriquet, and Barranca Bill I suppose I shall be to the end of my life, just because of the playful fancy of my California friends."

Vivian was in a mood for speaking with additional severity, but at that moment the passage of a man who looked at them keenly reminded her that they had reached the first of the village cabins.

"Do you see where we are?" she asked.

"Yes; most of these cabins are occupied by my own workmen."

"Yes; but if we go any further, we are liable to be seen together," she reminded him.

He looked at her sharply, and then drew the natural inference in the case; it looked as though she did not wish people to see her in his company.

"Very well; if you think you will not be molested again we may as well part here," he coldly said.

"I think it best so, for though I really fear these roughs very much, it is best I should run some risk from them rather than be seen with you. Once more, thank you for rescuing me, and—good-night."

"Good-night."

Barranca Bill spoke the words very slowly as he looked after Vivian, while she glided rapidly away, and then began pulling viciously at his beard.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" he commented. "I never could get the statistics of womankind firmly in my head, and this one knocks me further out of time than all the rest. She is kind and friendly one moment, and sharp as a buzz-saw the next. And she wound up by sweetly remarking that she had better risk the roughs than to be seen with me. Well, I appreciate the boost she gave the roughs, but it seems to me I rather suffer by her philanthropy. So she don't want to be seen with me! Barranca Bill, you had better go and hang your harp on a willow tree!"

He strode away—forgetful, if he was in earnest, that willow trees did not flourish around Comet Camp—but suddenly paused.

"Hold on! I catch an idea. Cephas has taken her into his confidence, and all her seemingly vague talk about California and the Michigan copper-mines was to pump me. I called on Cephas and asked him if he knew Helen Neville. He said no; but he lied. He has obtained possession of her somehow, and either killed or secreted her; and now he has deputized Vivian to learn something about my past. She claimed that I denied having been in California. All rubbish; she knew I never made any such claim. As for her talk about the Michigan copper-mines, I don't exactly catch on; but it is clear she wanted to know if I had been there. Well, by Jupiter! this rocks me all in pieces. I had clung to the idea that Vivian was very different from her father, but I reckon women are pretty much alike!"

At the same moment Vivian was groping in darkness as profound as his own, metaphorically speaking.

"Did Barranca Bill intend to jest to the extent of an insult, or is he crazy?" she mentally inquired, as she hastened home. "During the last ten minutes he has denied all he so earnestly asserted at Graveyard Gulch, and I am bewildered. So he intimated that he had not been pleasantly employed while with me at the Gulch! Upon my word, he is very polite!"

Miss Vivian's eyes sparkled, and could she have seen Mr. Barranca Bill at that moment, it is very likely she would have politely informed him that their partnership was no longer agreeable or desirable.

It was not until she was alone in her room that she saw a partial excuse for her supposed ally's last statements in the fact that it was a part of the Graveyard Gulch compact that if she ever met Bill in the village, neither of them should allude to their business alliance.

"That must be why he talked so strangely," she said, brightening; "but I can't say I admired his words, for all that."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MAN IN THE BLUE SPECTACLES.

HORACE LINCOLN did not retire that night as soon as he reached his room. He had conceived what he believed to be a brilliant idea, and he was trying to see his way clear for its accomplishment without himself falling over any of the stumbling-blocks in his way.

From the time when he first thought what a flood of good luck would descend upon him could he change identities with his brother, his mind had gone on until the idea became his ruling passion.

If that brother was dead, he, Horace, could take advantage of the remarkable resemblance between them, freely appear in public, and no

Barranca Bill, the Revolver Champion.

one would suspect that he was not Barranca Bill.

To the dead man he could give all the dark crimes of Ben Warren, Paul Pindar and the other men of whom he knew; to himself he could take the reputation, wealth and other blessings of Barranca Bill.

Moreover, he would be more likely to succeed with Vivian Brown.

When he was first saved by William, Horace had felt a degree of gratitude, for he was well aware that he had been saved from the lynchers' gibbet, but the selfishness of his nature soon asserted itself, and he went from one degree to another, until, on this evening, the climax approached.

If only Barranca Bill would die!

Why not? Abe Neal had seen and identified him as Ben Warren; he had sworn to kill him; and Horace knew enough about Abe to feel sure he would keep his word if possible.

One touch of the finger on a trigger, or one soft blow with a knife, then—exit, Ben Warren, Paul Pindar and the others; enter, the only Barranca Bill.

"I'll do it!"

It was with this resolution that Horace went to bed, and in the morning, luck favored him.

"I'm going away for the day, Horace," said William, at breakfast. "You need not look for me until after dark."

"Another day alone for me? Well, I'll bear it. Which way do you go?"

"North."

"Not to Ramrod Bar?"

"No; I'm afraid I might not be welcome," said Bill, grimly.

"You will probably get home about nine o'clock."

"That's the figure I set."

It was two hours later, when Barranca Bill was well away and Hans Vedder snoring in his chair, that Horace left the house and walked boldly down the street. It was not more than three minutes' walk to his destination, but he was so much afraid that he would meet Abe Neal, or some one from Ramrod Bar, that he was perspiring freely when he entered a second-hand clothing store toward which he had hurried.

He was very politely greeted as "Mr. Lincoln" by the bland Jew who kept the place, and, somewhat relieved in mind, he proceeded to business.

Half an hour later, having bound the Jew to silence by a generous payment, he emerged from the shop in a disguise which left no trace of his real self.

Clad in a rusty dress-suit of black, he had assumed a gray wig and false beard, an old silk hat and a pair of blue spectacles.

Seen then, one would have said he was some homeless old "crank," a would-be inventor of perpetual motion or something of that kind; and he was confident he could walk the streets of Comet Camp in safety.

"I am playing with fire," he thought, as he walked at a pace suited to his new character. "If this plan fails, and my worthy brother learns of my absence from the house, he may be set on the road to greater discoveries. But, the plan must not fail; I'll find Abe Neal and touch him to the quick!"

It was not so easy to find Abe, and the schemer had visited nearly all available places when he finally came upon him in a saloon. Six years had passed since he had seen him, but the recognition was instantaneous.

For one moment Horace wavered, for he knew that if Abe Neal should recognize him in turn it would be a death affair for one of them; then, summoning all his resolution, he went to the same table with him and called for a glass of liquor.

He made no haste to speak, and when he did it was on a trivial subject, but with the ice once broken he wound around to his object with great skill.

His courage increased as time passed, and it was plain that Abe did not suspect him. The latter treated him after the fashion of a playful grizzly, for the seemingly rusty old man rather amused him, little suspecting that he was literally being bearded in his den.

His greatest foe was before him, and he knew it not; Ben Warren was before his eyes, and he was merely jesting at his expense.

Anon, the old man in blue spectacles had a story to tell. He had once owned a mine in Zigzag Gap, but by a flaw in his papers one Barranca Bill had wrested it from him, and on that particular day he felt particularly sad because he had heard Barranca Bill say to another man that at nine o'clock that evening he would enter the town by the northern trail with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket, a three months' yield of the mine.

"He carries this fortune in his pocket like a common man would a jack-knife, and I am a beggar," added the old man, viciously.

Abe Neal's eyes were sparkling. Twenty thousand dollars! What a chance to secure revenge and a fortune at one and the same time! It would never occur again; it must be improved.

He ordered liquor for the man in the blue

spectacles, and then plied him with questions until he had heard the statement again and again.

There could be no mistake; Barranca Bill would that evening approach Comet Camp with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket; whether he would reach the village was another question.

If Horace had not had a strong head he could not have taken care of all the liquor Abe placed before him, and he was glad when the fellow was willing he should go.

He regained his room without any trouble.

"The plot works well!" he muttered, rubbing his hands. "Neal will shoot Bill at the edge of the village, and I'll be near at hand so that I can run to some saloon and say that I have found a dead man outside the town. Believing me to be Barranca Bill, the crowd will follow, and when they see how much the dead man looks like me, they will raise their tuneful voices, and say, 'This is Paul Pindar, dead!' Ha! ha!"

Barranca Bill had spent the day in endeavoring to gain some trace of Helen Neville; but, as the evening shadows were falling, he was homeward bound, disappointed and discouraged. He had championed the girl's cause unasked, and as she seemed to have vanished forever he intended to drop the matter right there.

Gentle John was doggedly fixed in the opinion that they had witnessed her murder on the cliff by Cephas Brown, but no further sign had been found, and Sheriff Sharpe refused to arrest the great man of Comet Camp on such flimsy evidence.

So, riding homeward that night, Barranca Bill resolved to think no more about the girl. He had done his best, but the matter seemed likely to remain a mystery until the graves gave up their dead.

As he neared the first scattering cabins of the village his way lay along the base of a ridge, which was lined with rocks, while on the other side, a few yards distant, the ground again descended gradually.

He passed along the place in a thoughtful mood, but he was aroused in a way which was decidedly practical.

Several things occurred with startling rapidity.

His horse pricked up his ears and directed his eyes to the left, and then, as though the sight did not please him, gave a loud snort and tremendous bound at one and the same moment, and Barranca Bill went off the saddle as though he had been a log.

The fall was not a heavy one, for he partially saved himself by one hand, but he was conscious that something else had happened.

There had been a bright flash by the wayside, a dull report and a singing around his head as he went down, and he was sharp enough to suspect that only the leap of his horse had intervened between himself and death from the bullet of an assassin.

Realizing this he lay perfectly still but drew his revolver, and in a moment more two men darted from behind the boulder.

"Quick!" cried one, "his infernal horse has gone on to ther village an' will give ther alarm ef he is see'd. Do you cut his throat while I go through his pockets!"

Barranca Bill smiled grimly. He had been in the West long enough to know how to deal with such fellows, and he lost no time in beginning work.

Crack! crack!

Twice his revolver spoke, with only a breath of time between the shots, and the man who had drawn the revolver went down in a heap and his companion uttered a yell and started off in rapid flight.

Such a speedy victory was unexpected, but the attack had been so cowardly that Barranca Bill resolved to see it through to the finish.

He bounded to his feet and, only pausing to make sure that the man with the knife was down to stay, started in pursuit of the fleeing man.

Crack!

Another revolver spoke behind him, but, though well aware that a third man had joined in the shoot, he did not even turn his head.

Horace Lincoln came out from behind a rock, a revolver still in his hand.

"Curse it! the plot has failed!" he hissed. "Does Bill bear a charmed life? Here's a rough down forever, and Abe Neal is tearing for cover like a deer. I've also tried my hand and failed, and I reckon the safest thing I can do is to make tracks for home. Two to one Bill kills Neal; I'd give my last dollar if they would kill each other!"

And then Horace started for home at a rapid pace, growling maledictions on the luck which had saved his only brother from death at an assassin's band.

He reached his destination without mishap.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BARRANCA BILL DOES A LITTLE SHOOTING.

In the meanwhile, Barranca Bill had followed up his would-be assassin in an earnest way. Once or twice he was on the point of

trying his revolver again, but he had no desire to shed blood unless in self-defense.

The fugitive, who was Abe Neal, did not suspect any such scruples on the part of his pursuer, and instead of making for the Weeping Willows in a direct line, as he wished, he dodged about among the miners' cabins in a confusing way.

Many of the owners of the huts were in or about their premises, and though a shooting frolic was no strange event in Comet Camp, they at once became interested and Barranca Bill soon had a dozen stout fellows stringing along in his rear.

The dark outlines of the Weeping Willows had just appeared in front of Abe Neal when two pedestrians were brought to a halt by the race.

"Howlin' Hannah!" cried the foremost, "it are Bill o' ther Barranca in a muss ag'in! Bad Lung, gird up yer lions an' foller me. There's fun ahead!"

The speaker, who, of course, was Gentle John, drew a pair of revolvers, and from under his coat Bad Lung produced a ten-pin.

"Me setee 'em up ag'in. 'Melican man runee mighty fast!"

The Celestial panted the words as he endeavored to make his short legs keep time with his employer's longer ones, but all interest was centered on another point as, the Weeping Willows being reached, Abe Neal, not daring to take time for an application at the door, went up and forward with a tremendous bound and shot crashing through the window, sash and all.

What remained of the sash was still quivering when Barranca Bill followed in like style, and Gentle John came to the scratch a good third.

Bad Lung was the fourth in the race, but he could not have taken the leap to save his life. He ran to the wall and began climbing in, but he was only half-through when the foremost miner took the leap and knocked the Chinaman over like one of his beloved pins; and then like a flock of sheep the whole tail of this human comet followed and it was something like fifteen men in a dark room.

Those who came last alighted on a twisting mass of humanity, but except for that no one could account for anybody except himself.

At this critical moment a door opened, light fell on the scene and the Witch of the Willows appeared to the view of all who were in condition to look.

On her part, she saw a strange scene.

On the floor by the window the miners were trying to distinguish arms and legs in the crush, Gentle John was on his feet with a revolver in each hand, Bad Lung lay in the middle of the floor gasping like a stranded fish, and well apart from the rest Barranca Bill held Abe Neal by the collar and menaced him with a six-shooter.

Gentle John's voice arose cheerfully.

"All down but two," he observed.

The remark aroused Bad Lung, who staggered to his feet and, seeing his ten-pin, caught it up affectionately.

"Me setee 'em up ag'in!" he observed.

By this time Hecate had recovered from her amazement and her voice arose shrilly.

"What in the fiend's name does this mean?" she cried.

"I reckon, marm, that ther cows hev kim home ter roost," responded Gentle John, who was plainly no farmer.

"My window is broken and my house invaded. It is a riot, and I'll have vengeance on you all!" she shouted, shaking her staff at them.

"Just hold your horses, old lady, and we'll pass the hat," said Barranca Bill, coolly. "I'll pay for your window and tame the rioters. I've got all I came for and we'll leave you with your Lambs."

The miners had regained their feet and stood firm in the rear, as good backing as one could wish for, but to Abe Neal the situation began to look dubious. He was a child in the hands of Bill, but he was game to the last and not inclined to take water with Hecate's Lambs in easy call.

He knew Bill was watching his arms carefully, but being a man of remarkable suppleness he was not at a loss for ways and means.

One moment he threw his nerves to a tension pitch and then arose in the air with a fine evolution which sent him over his captor's head, broke the latter's hold and nearly demolished Bad Lung, who was keeping an excellent alignment as a rear-guard; and then a second bound took him behind the bar—for this was the room which the Witch kept open during the day.

With the scent of battle arising so strong, Hecate struck her staff on the floor, leaped aside and the Lambs came pouring through the door, ferocious as usual in their tattered clothing, shaggy beards and display of firearms.

There they halted, and the rival factions looked at each other, both reluctant to proceed to extremities, but every man resolved to be counted in if bullets were turned as trumps.

A hush followed, but Abe Neal was far from being idle. He had dropped behind the counter

for safety, but, chancing to observe the bar-keeper's revolver, he resolved to improve the chance to get at Barranca Bill.

The new danger had drawn the latter's eyes away for a moment, and Abe soon obtained so perfect a bead that William Lincoln seemed fated to cross the range in spite of all.

One pair of eyes saw Neal's purpose, however, and Bad Lung, creeping forward, let fall his ten-pin on the fellow's head with such force that he dropped again behind the bar.

"All down but nine-eel!" the Celestial observed, in a gentle monotone.

"Set 'em up ag'in!" exultantly added Gentle John, who had seen the final act. "You've clared that alley, my cherub!"

"Now, then, what are you going to do?" demanded Hecate, in the imperious tone of one who feels herself mistress of the situation.

"That's all for you to say, marm," replied Bill, coolly. "You've got a rooster in this chicken-coop that I want—he's on ice behind the counter—and if you deliver him over with his front legs tied, all well and good. Otherwise, we burn your coop if we can raise the matches to do it."

A shout from the miners showed that they were ready for the work. Hecate's discipline had thus far saved her den, but all Comet Camp would rejoice to see it burn.

The Lambs scowled defiance and then looked at their mistress, but she saw her scepter and kingdom hanging by a thread.

"This is a riot," she repeated, in a less arrogant tone.

"It's justice on a frolic, marm, but we don't war on you. We want only one man. Go behind the counter, Gentle John, and land our fish."

The man addressed went over the bar like an acrobat, there was a brief struggle, and then Abe Neal was pitched head-first into the charmed circle. He struck, and Barranca Bill planted his foot on his breast.

"Here's the stake for which we play," he said, "and if the rest of you keep out you'll be in condition to eat your breakfast with a relish."

The Lambs, however, were no longer in an amiable mood. Neal was a favorite among them, and it was plain to see that even Hecate could no longer keep them back.

"Down, all!" suddenly cried Bill.

Then his two revolvers spoke as one and the lights in the further room went out with a crash, plunging the whole scene into utter darkness.

Fortunately for the miners, they heard and obeyed his order, and as they dropped a shower of lead whistled harmlessly over them.

"Forward!" shouted Bill, springing to his feet.

Again he was promptly obeyed, but as they swept along they brought up hard and solidly against the wall. Brief as had been the delay, it had been enough for the Lambs to hurry through the opening and close the way behind them.

"Dash down the door!" ordered Bill.

"Hold!"
The order rang out almost above them, and then, as the room was again filled with light, cast from a reflector, the face of Hecate was seen at a small opening in the wall.

Some of the miners fingered their weapons anxiously, but even the roughest of them had a sort of admiration for the bravery of the woman who thus dared their anger.

"Barranca Bill, where are you?" she continued.

"I was here a minute ago, and—yes; I'm still on deck."

"Why should we have trouble? Do you see your man?"

Bill glanced at Abe Neal who lay on the floor with a bullet through his side, the accidental gift of one of his own friends, and he had the appearance of a man nearly done with life.

"Yes," said Bill, slowly.

"You said you wanted no more than him. Then why did you shoot out my lights? You started my boarders. Come, sir, I am a lone woman, and you say you don't make war on such. I want to be let alone, and have my house let alone. I keep a quiet place and no one can prove to the contrary. Will you take your men and go away?"

There was a mixture of sense and hypocrisy in what she said, and as it was hardly in keeping with his position as a mine superintendent to lead a crowd of house-burners, Barranca Bill yielded to her argument.

"Count me in with the peace-makers, marm," he said. "To-morrow morning I'll pay for all the glass I've broken, and as we are both of an amiable nature I don't see why we can't picket our horses on the same prairie. In five minutes my crowd shall be gone, but you may keep your fallen Lamb who has been so hardly used. He needs good nursing now or he won't frolic in your fold many days. Good-night!"

Hecate was not reluctant to have the call thus abruptly terminated, and she watched in grim silence as the invaders left as they had come.

"I ain't no mutineer," said Gentle John,

mournfully, as they walked away, "but I have a presentiment we'd hav' did better if we'd burned ther durned ranch."

"The temptation was on me," acknowledged Bill, "but I am not yet sure Helen Neville is not there."

"Her disappearance is ther remarkablest thing on record, an' it hits me hard, so that I can sca'cely sleep o' nights. She was an uncommon fine female."

"Me likee her muchee," added Bad Lung, gently.

In that crowd the Chinaman had his say, and no one molested him as he trotted home with his ten-pin under his arm.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE YOUNG SURGEON.

WITHIN his little cabin at Ramrod Bar, Honest George still lay on his bed, but he had improved noticeably since we last saw him.

"That thar young doctor from Alligator Flat has did it all," he explained to each visitor. "He's a bull team on a rampage, Doctor Monday is, an' he has jest raised my deck fore an' aft an' put chain-shot through ev'ry knave in ther pack. Why, ole man, his medicine makes my knees an' chin meet, it are so powerful, an' when it are a-workin' I feel as though somebody was diggin' an artesian well right through me. An' with his scalpin'-knife—wal, ye arter see'd him go fur ther wond. He jabbed ther steel in ez cool ez I would skin a mountain goat!"

Evidently the doctor knew his business, and between him and a good constitution Honest George was rapidly recovering.

As he comes striding into the cabin, the morning when we reintroduce Honest George, let us look at him. Twenty-four years of age, he had a good form, a bold, frank, intelligent face and a manner at once energetic and free from affectation.

A graduate of an Eastern medical college, he had grown impatient at slow progress in his native State and removed to Nevada, and thus it was that Honest George came to have so good a surgeon as Lewis Mundee—or Monday, as the miners made it, by transferring the accent from the last to the first syllable.

"Well, what's the good word this morning?" he asked, even while his keen eyes read all that could be told.

"Thar's piles on 'em, doctor, fur I'm almost myself."

"So you are, George. You're looking bright as a new dollar. Take up your bed and walk!"

"Walk?"

"To draw it mild, I'll allow you to sit up for an hour or so. I've ordered a chair down from Boggs's Hotel, and you shall now take your first step toward full recovery. In a week I'll have you going the rounds of the town."

It was an encouraging assertion, but Honest George's face grew dark.

"Then ther hour is comin' fur my work," he uttered.

"Your work?"

"Ter seek Paul Pindar; ter avenge Square Rob; ter t'ar ther cowardly assassin in pieces!" Honest George fairly hissed the words.

"Now, hold on right here," expostulated Mundee. "Don't you let your thoughts run in that channel. You will undo all I've done if you go to tearing about the country. You don't know where Paul Pindar is—"

"Don't I? You bet I do. He an' Barranca Bill are one. Ther idol o' Comet Camp is ther man that shot my brother like a dog, an' I'll pay him in his own coin."

"But your strength—"

Honest George held up his great, muscular arm.

"That's me!" he cried, running one finger along the knotted sinews. "I put my muscle ag'in' that o' any man in Nevada, an' it'll all be there when I see Barranca Bill. Don't ye argy, Doctor Monday, fur you an' me are good friends, an' you're a hull team with yer tools o' trade. When you get your work in, fever, chills, rheumatism, ja'nders an' alimony git out on ther jump; but don't you meddle between me an' Barranca Bill. I've sworn ter fetch him!"

The wounded giant lowered his brawny arm, but as it lay on his breast, the muscle arising like a hillock, it was plain William Lincoln would find he had no Abe Neal with whom to deal when Honest George struck his trail.

Doctor Mundee wisely let the matter drop.

"Thar's another job fur ye, doctor," said George, anon.

"Another? Where?"

"Ef you'll look from ther door, you'll see a leetle hut nestled on ther side o' ther mountain, a quarter o' a mile up—"

"I've noticed it already."

"Wal, thar lives Daddy Gray, an' ther old rat has sent down word ter hev ye call next time you're here. I reckon he wants you ter give him a lift. He's lost his head."

"Lost his head?" echoed Mundee.

"It amounts ter that; he's lost his mem'ry. He is as good an ole chap as lives in Nevada—a patriarch, somebody called him; that means honest an' squar', don't it?—but he's no idee whatever o' ther past. It are all gone up ter

ther time he struck Ramrod Bar; he don't even know his name."

"A case of softening of the brain, I suppose."

"No, it ain't, for he's as keen as a brier when pushed to it."

"Some injury to his brain, then—the depression of a bone, caused by a heavy blow or something of the kind."

"No scar is visible."

"Has he been examined by a surgeon?" continued Mundee, all his professional zeal aroused.

"No."

"Well, I'll go up and see Daddy Gray. Perhaps I can help him to find his head," said the surgeon, cheerfully.

Doctor Mundee was not the only person who wished to see Daddy Gray that day, for, at an early hour, a rap brought him to the outer door and he recognized in the applicant the old woman who had so nearly perished at the hands of the lynchers at Comet Camp.

He had seen but little of the affair, and, with his kindly nature, had been inclined to think her more sinned against than sinning.

Hecate, leaning on her staff, bowed low.

"This is Daddy Gray, I believe."

"Such is my name, madam," he answered, with great politeness. "Will you walk in?"

It was an unnecessary question, for the Witch had journeyed all the way from Comet Camp to see him, but she was pleased to have the interview open so well.

She entered and glanced keenly about the room, but there was nothing of interest there. The hut was divided into two rooms, and the outer one was merely a kitchen.

"I'm afraid you will find my accommodations poor," said Gray, apologetically, "but it is seldom any one but myself comes here."

"Have your old friends deserted you?"

"Either that or I have deserted them," he said, with a faint smile. "I'm a good deal mixed up on that point and can't give you any definite answer."

"Some one was telling me you had old acquaintances at Comet Camp," Hecate carelessly observed.

"They did? Well, that is queer; I don't know a solitary person at the Camp."

"Why, Cephas Brown is an old friend, isn't he?"

The Witch was looking keenly at her host, and she saw a cloud cross his face; but there was no sign of the gleam of intelligence she had hoped to see.

"That is just what is worrying me," said Daddy, confidentially. "I lay awake nights trying to solve the riddle. Mr. Brown's face is very familiar; it is as though I saw a picture of George Washington and recognized it, but I couldn't tell where it was made."

"Perhaps you saw Cephas Brown in New Orleans?"

"New Orleans? I don't think I was ever there; the name don't sound at all familiar. Is he from New Orleans?"

"Yes. Come, old mar, it seems to me you might remember what you know about Brown if you put your mind to it."

"My mind? Why, I haven't any," said the aged man, with a simplicity which enraged Hecate.

Down on the floor came the end of her staff in the fashion by which she cowed the Lambs of the Weeping Willows.

"Go and get one, then, you old— Ha! what was that?"

She broke off in her fierce retort, and some sort of a cry came from the inner room.

A deeper cloud flickered over Daddy's face.

"That? Oh! that was—it was— Well, I didn't hear anything, but I reckon it was my dog, marm."

"I thought 'twas a child. But about this Brown. You think he was once your friend?"

"My friend? Oh! Lord, no—begging your pardon, marm. But I don't think he was ever my friend. I don't feel that way toward him. Something tells me I ought to hate him, and yet I don't know why. You see, my head—"

"Hark! that sound again. Was it from the other room? It sounded to me like—"

Daddy Gray's face was full of consternation and alarm, and as he put out his hands they shook with unusual violence.

"Ha! ha!" he laughed, in a cracked voice, "it is that dog of mine. He is a cute rascal; he is, marm, for sure; and he can imitate a human being in its ways right well. When I whip him and he whines, you would almost swear a child was crying. Ah! there he goes again, soft and low—"

Daddy was speaking very glibly, but his gaze wandered from Hecate to the door of the inner room in a manner which plainly showed he was ill at ease.

"Open the door and let him out!" snapped the woman. "I hate such a whining and moaning. Throw him in the water-pail and drown him."

The old man's hands went up again.

"I couldn't think of it, marm, for Skip is my only pet. But you were speaking of— Oh! I remember; it was about Cephas Brown. Well, you see, that name hangs in my memory, and I feel that I once knew him, and that I ought to

hate him. When I saw him at Comet Camp I was so excited that I sprung upon him, seized his throat and bore him to the floor like a wolf would a wounded deer. I had the strength of a giant then, and I'm really afraid I should have done some harm if they had not pulled me away. I feel very sorry it happened."

"And in spite of this you can't recall the part he played in your old life?"

"Not a thing."

Hecate rapped her own knuckles with her staff. She could have torn Daddy Gray in pieces for his stupidity, had there been any good to be gained by it. In her campaign against the Honorable Mr. Brown there were some flaws, despite Luke Gridley's boasts, and she had hoped to strengthen the weak places by this visit to the old man.

At this moment, however, another wailing cry arose from the inner room, and with a growl Hecate arose, strode to the door, and was about to open it, when a strong hand fell on her shoulder, she was whirled around and back, and with flashing eyes and an excited air, Daddy Gray stood between her and the door.

CHAPTER XXIX.

DOCTOR MUNDEE'S PATIENTS INCREASE.

THE Witch of the Weeping Willows had never been more thoroughly astonished than by the usage received from Daddy Gray. She had been angered by his lack of memory, and the moaning from the inner room had so annoyed her, that she resolved to liberate the imprisoned dog and give him a kick he would not soon forget.

Daddy Gray, however, towered in the way like a giant in his wrath.

"You can't go in thar!" he exclaimed, breaking into the dialect of the mines.

"Why can't I?" snapped Hecate, quarrelsomely.

"Because I say you can't. I'm master o' my own house, I reckon, an' I don't allow any human ter run ag'in' my will. You keep back!"

"You're worse than your dog," sneered the woman.

"I thrashed that dog an' shut him up ter farn manners, an' nobody can't let him loose till I say so."

The old man was grand in his excitement—despite the rude language into which he had fallen—sure sign of great mental disturbance on his part—but Hecate was no longer blind to the signs of the times.

"Hark ye, old man," she said, shaking her finger in his face, "you can't fool me any longer. *There's a baby in there!*"

Daddy's face was very white, but as he moved forward and caught the arm of the Witch, there was plenty of strength in his grasp.

"Woman, you lie!" he fairly bissed.

It was many years since Hecate, the Witch, had been cowed, but she started back from that encounter with unresisting hands and mien lips, and she was not at all sorry when an 'other step sounded behind her and a stranger entered.

"I'll g—now, I'll go," she said hurriedly; and without another word, she pushed through the door and went bobbling down the path, leaning on her staff.

Doctor Mundee, for it was he who had just arrived, watched her for a moment and then turned to Daddy Gray.

"Your wife is quite sprightly for an old lady," he observed gravely.

"My wife?"

"Yes. She just went out."

"She my wife! Oh! great Cicero, no—no! She wasn't my wife; I haven't any, and I don't know her. Why I would rather have a tiger-cat!"

"That's solid, my friend. Well, I am Doctor Mundee. Honest George said you wanted to see me."

"Yes, I did. I told 'em to tell you. I—want—to—see—you!"

Daddy Gray spoke very slowly, and his eyes searched the young surgeon's face as though he would read his nature, his very thoughts.

The analysis seemed satisfactory, for he suddenly relapsed into his old manner.

"I've got a patient in there for you, doctor," he said, indicating the inner room.

"Who is it?"

"A young woman that I found one day at the foot of a cliff. She got a fall over the rocks, somehow, and nearly killed herself, and now she is struggling through a fever. I know something about medicine myself, and I've kept the case in hand pretty well until last night, but I tell you that fever is just about a hundred boss-power and I can't hang on to it much longer."

"Let me see her at once."

Mundee's face had grown grave; he saw in his mind a case so long neglected that all the drugs in the world could not overcome the fever.

Daddy Gray first fastened the outer door and then conducted the doctor into the inner room.

A bed stood in one corner, and upon it lay the young woman we have seen the old miner rescue from the fall over the cliff.

Doctor Mundee saw a face of a loveliness he had believed unknown to Nevada; a wonder-

fully pretty face, but over it was spread the red flush of fever and he knew he looked on a very ill woman.

Her eyes were closed, but she moved her head as he gazed and moaned in the fashion which had made Hecate think a baby was wailing. Could she have looked into the room then, she would have comprehended over what the old man stood guard so loyally, though his object might not have been so clear.

"What have you done?" Doctor Mundee asked.

Daddy Gray told in his simple way, showing no pride at the medical knowledge he really possessed, and the doctor breathed a sigh of relief.

"You have left few things undone which I should have done," he said, "but, as you say, the case has now reached a point where the best of care and skill is needed. The crisis is near, and within twenty-four hours the patient will be on the road to recovery or out of earthly pain. Who is she?"

"That I don't know. She has been out of her head ever since I brought her here, and the only clew I have received is by her mention of the word Agatha."

"Agatha! Agatha!"

Doctor Mundee repeated the name mechanically as he gazed down at the flushed face. He was still a young man, capable of feeling the charm of beauty, and over him crept a strange pity and tenderness for this young woman who lay battling with death in the lonely mountain hut, her identity and her place of residence unknown.

Even as he looked her eyelids lifted and she looked at him with eyes unnaturally bright.

"Show me the way to Comet Camp," she said, in a steady voice.

"You shall go directly," answered Mundee, rallying from the start he received. "Is your home at Comet Camp?"

"I don't know. I'm sure. I don't think I have any. Are the horses ready?"

"They shall be ordered at once. Who shall I say wants them? What is your name?"

The girl put her hand to her forehead and seemed to make an effort to think, while Mundee looked at her as though fascinated.

She looked up abruptly.

"I can't remember my name," she said. "Strange, isn't it? I registered at the hotel, but—wait, it seems to me—yes, I have it. My name is Agatha."

"But you have another one—"

"Who told you of that?" she interrupted, sharply.

"No one, I assure you. I think you misunderstand. Now, my name is Lewis Mundee. Yours is Agatha Smith, or Brown—"

"Brown? Yes, I think that is it. If it isn't, then I've heard the name Brown lately. It is painted in black letters on my forehead—here! There are other names there, but they are upside down, and I can't read them. Perhaps you can?"

She had placed one hand on her forehead, and was speaking quite helplessly. Mundee saw that the conversation was likely to injure her without doing any good, and he resolved to end it at once.

Making some trivial reply, he motioned to Daddy Gray to take his place at the bedside, and stepped aside to mix a sleeping potion.

"Did the stage lose a wheel?" she asked, addressing the old man.

"I believe it did."

"I must have struck on my head, for it feels funny. What are those boys doing there?"

She pointed toward the door, and Daddy Gray looked around, rather startled, but no boys were visible.

"Oh! nothing in particular," he answered.

"Each one has a little sign that says 'Comet Camp.' They dance well, don't they? Well, you had better order the horses now and tell them my name is Agatha."

The old man was greatly relieved when the doctor approached with his drug. The patient drank without hesitation, and then they kept her mind away from the journey she believed she ought to take until the lids dropped over her glowing eyes and she was asleep.

Doctor Mundee sighed.

"Poor girl! alone and friendless, except for us. Old man, have you a blanket on which I can sleep?"

"Yes."

"Then I do not leave here until the fever turns. From this sleep she will awake to live or to die; the crisis is at hand. We will watch over her, observing each breath, and together we will learn the result."

Gray put out his hand quickly.

"You are a noble man; you have a noble heart!" he said, with unexpected energy.

Mundee suddenly remembered his conversation with his village patient.

"Honest George told me something about you, Mr. Gray," he said.

"Then you know I've lost my head?" questioned the old man, simply.

"He told me all he knew regarding your misfortune. How do you account for it?"

"I am inclined to think I fell out of a bal-

loon," replied Gray, losing his lucidity as soon as his own case was grappled with by his clouded mind.

"Why so?"

"Well, there is a good deal of air in my brainpan, and I can account for it in no other way."

"Do you remember an illness?"

"No."

"Well, you have run afoul of trouble somehow."

"Yes, and I think I shall go to Brown and ask him if he ever sailed a balloon. I remember him, and I almost grasp the subject, but it slips away just as I try to close my hand on it. I remember a balloon, however."

Mundee was a young man and he looked at Daddy in some amazement. While assisting Agatha he had been perfectly cool and systematic, but now he began to talk almost as wildly as the fever-stricken patient.

"You both mention the name of Brown. Are they one and the same person? Who is your Brown?"

"He lives at Comet Camp. I recognized the face as soon as I saw him, but I couldn't grasp his identity. I leaped on him like a panther, though, and I would have torn him in pieces only they pulled me off."

An unusual wildness beamed in the old man's eyes, and, fearful that he would have two mad patients on his hands at once, Mundee hastened to stop him.

"Let us speak of Agatha," he said.

CHAPTER XXX.

AGATHA.

"VIVIAN, Agatha will arrive to-day."

This important announcement was made by the Honorable Mr. Brown at the breakfast table, the morning after the rescue of Miss Brown by Barranca Bill.

Vivian looked at her father with something akin to alarm. She had been expecting the announcement, so it was in no sense a surprise, but it came home to her with startling force, in spite of that.

Another woman was coming to swell their family circle—a woman her father said was her elder sister, but one she strongly suspected was to be made his wife if she was not so already—and, mixed with a good many vague suspicions, she saw very plainly the one fact that she would no longer be the head of the domestic department.

She was so long in answering that Cephas added, in a significant tone:

"I trust you will receive her properly."

"Have I ever failed to comply with your wishes?" she demanded, spiritedly.

"Fortunately, no!"

All her resolutions to outwardly make the best of a bad matter fled before his uncalled-for manner, and through the remainder of the meal not a word was spoken. Vivian was indignant, while her father, though plainly seeing her mood, felt so secure in his own lofty position that he did not strive to conciliate her.

She was thus given fresh zeal to continue her efforts to learn all about the mysterious Agatha.

Immediately after breakfast she went to her room where she was soon joined by Katie, the servant, who gave unlimited sympathy, but her words failed to bring relief.

A little before noon a carriage drawn by two fine horses arrived at Comet Camp and created a tumult among the inhabitants. Such an outfit had never before graced the streets of the young town, and those who had money at stake in a business way threw up their hats at what they thought the forerunner of a flood-tide of prosperity.

The landlord of the Cosey Corral chanced to observe the team as it approached and his smile grew dazzlingly bright, but deep gloom followed as it rolled on.

The spectators saw a muscular colored man at the ribbons and a veiled lady on the rear seat, and some, noticing that her dress was of silk, began to speak of a celebration in her honor.

The carriage halted at the door of Cephas Brown's house, the carriage and horses were put away in his stable, and it was then generally remarked that the politician managed to get all the good things of life.

Vivian had seen the arrival from her window, noticing the silk dress but baffled by the veil in an attempt to see the face behind it; but she remained where she was until Katie appeared before her.

"Mr. Brown wants you to come an' see the other wan," explained the domestic. "He says, 'tell her that her sister has arrived.' Faith, an' I'd let her come to me, if I were yez."

Vivian felt her heart echo the advice, but as it was scarcely judicious, she went down to meet the new-comer.

Entering the sitting-room, she saw that lady without being able to distinguish a feature, and then her father's voice arose:

"Vivian, this is Agatha," he simply said.

Then the girl felt soft hands touch her own, soft lips pressed to hers and a soft voice murmur in her ear:

"We shall be friends, as well as sisters, I know."

This was Agatha.

Vivian had been for a moment like one in a dream, but her mind quickly cleared and her natural bravery asserted itself. She looked at the soft-spoken young woman in that critical way in which the best woman in the world regards those of her own sex against whom circumstances have prejudiced her.

Vivian was surprised by the appearance of Agatha.

Judging her by her record when she was "The Cricket," she had expected to see a bold, dashing creature after the style of a female bandit, but she was quite a different person.

Small, rather graceful, richly clad and without any offense to good taste, she had a face which looked childish, weak, soft and none too intelligent. She might be compared to a kitten, but they have claws and it was not certain that she was thus provided.

Her greeting to Vivian was an index of her nature, and when she spoke it was with remarkable gentleness.

Was this Agatha, the Cricket?—was this the woman who had taken a false oath by means of which Abe Neal was sent to the California State's prison for five years?

For a moment Vivian doubted, and then she remembered what had gone before—the story of the ex-convict, the odd agitation of her father, and the other minor circumstances by which she had arrived at her decision.

"Yes," thought Vivian, "this is Agatha, the Cricket. There cannot be two such wonderful Agathas in Nevada."

The new-comer talked of her journey with gentle vivacity. She had come all the way from Virginia City in the carriage; it was very kind of her papa to have sent it, but she felt sure he was always kind.

Vivian's face grew darker at each moment. Already she hated this soft-spoken girl-woman. In her throat there was a sensation as though she were liable to choke, but it was merely intense indignation.

The Honorable Mr. Brown smiled on Agatha and acted duly attentive, but when he looked at Vivian it was with a scowl which was really ugly. By his look he commanded her to speak or meet his severest wrath; she knew it, but not a word except monosyllabic replies to direct questions passed her lips.

Agatha did not seem in the least disturbed. She chattered like a well-disposed parrot and seemed inclined to make herself at home.

Anon, when he had called Katie to conduct her to her room to prepare for dinner, Mr. Brown turned to Vivian:

"Well," he said, icily, "what am I to make of this extraordinary conduct?"

"To what do you refer, sir?"

"To your treatment of your sister."

"Have I failed to treat her kindly?"

"You have sat like a statue during the whole interview. You did not return her greeting; you simply endured it; and your expression was that of one at a funeral, rather than one welcoming a sister. Remember what she has suffered. For my own part I am filled with remorse that I have so long been neglectful, and now it is for me, and for you to make her forget her hardships in the light of a new existence."

Cephas had gone from one extreme to another during his remarks, being now severe and then pathetic, but to Vivian he seemed far from being sincere and she somehow remembered the terse verdict of a spectator after her father had finished a soaring speech in the Nevada Legislature:

"Buncombe!"

Yet she replied calmly:

"Do not expect too much, father. You must remember that my position is a peculiar one—"

"You are thinking of the 'mighty dollar!'" retorted Brown.

"Sir?"

"You do not forget that there are now two heirs to my wealth."

Vivian's eyes sparkled anew.

"If such thoughts disturb your affectionate heart, sir, I beg that you will make Agatha the sole heiress. For me, you need have no thought."

With these words the girl swept from the room, afraid that in her indignation she would betray her suspicions in regard to Agatha. Cephas had made a mistake in thus forcing hostilities, and from that hour Vivian need have no scruples in regard to her war against the plot she believed she saw.

Once in her room she threw herself in a chair, and looking out of the window tried to analyze the situation. It was not her nature to give way to tears, and all her heroism was in arms against the new order of affairs.

"How I hate this woman!" she uttered, with a look which spoke plainer than words. "It frightens me to think of it. I have believed in duty and honor, but all these things seem like shades of the past. Is this I?—am I hating this woman so much, or do I dream?"

It was not strange that she asked the question, for in the last fortnight great changes had occurred.

"She is as meek and innocent of outward look as a kitten," she thought, "but I feel sure it is but a mask. She is deep and dangerous. 'Agatha, the Cricket!' The name was not ill applied. I feel more than ever certain that she is no sister of mine, and it remains for me to learn what she is. I place my sole hope in Barranca Bill."

Barranca Bill? No; not on him, but on a base knave who has usurped his identity, who is living a life which Barranca Bill would scorn to live, and who cares nothing for Vivian Brown's interests unless he can win her for his wife.

The air seemed to grow hot and heavy, and Vivian arose and went to the window.

Two hundred feet away a man sat on a rock smoking, his face turned toward the house. She recognized Luke Gridley, and was impressed by the fact that, frequently since his call on the night when the lynchers came to town, she had seen him lounging around and seemingly acting the spy.

Who and what was he? She knew no more than that his interview with Brown had ended in trouble between them; but she was now so impressed by the fact that he was acting a part of more than ordinary interest that she was for a moment tempted to go out to him.

The idea gave her another.

"Abe Neal!" she muttered. "This is the man who came to my father with the story of Agatha, the Cricket. Ah! I see a chance to win a move in the game. If I tell him of Agatha's present, he will tell me of Agatha's past, and in this way I can prove that she is a mere adventuress. I will see him; I must. But how? Barranca Bill cannot aid me, for Neal, still laboring under his mistake, would shoot him at sight. I must see the man myself—but how? Where shall I find him? I feel sure he is still in Comet Camp, and I must put timidity aside and seek for him. Wherever he is, there will I go!"

It was a brave resolve, but she did not know he was at that moment lying, desperately wounded, at the Weeping Willows.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SARRANCA BILL BEARS STRANGE NEWS.

THE position of the Lincoln brothers was a singular one. Outwardly, they were always polite, attentive and even kind, but they never went so far as affection. With Horace, this feeling was unknown; selfishness had long since absorbed the little good vouchsafed him by nature.

Barranca Bill never forgot that he was his brother, and at times he tried to stir up a little warmth, but something seemed to stand like an impassable barrier in the way. He did not, however, allow himself to doubt him. He turned his back on the evidence which convicted him of basely murdering Square Rob, at Ramrod Bar, and by figuratively closing his eyes, managed to believe his side of the story.

And Horace?—what was he doing in return for this noble proof of the bond of blood?

As we have seen, he was assuming his brother's identity with Vivian, hoping to marry her for her money; and he had not only induced Abe Neal to murder him but, when that man failed, he had himself taken a shot at the brother who had saved him from the wrath of the lynchers.

Despite all this, the miserable wretch met Barranca Bill in just the same way that he had done the morning after he was snatched from the hands of death, planning, meanwhile, to strike again.

Something had led Bill to withhold confidence in all matters of importance, but as it became evident that his search for Helen Neville was a hopeless task he felt impelled to tell Horace of his singular affair.

He could no longer doubt but that the girl had met her fate at the hands of either Hecate or Brown, and with the refusal of Sheriff Sharpe to make an arrest on the present grounds of suspicion he felt like seeking advice, as people will when themselves at fault.

Accordingly, after the brothers had adjourned to the sitting-room, after breakfast, the following morning, he began the story. The fact that Helen had claimed him as her husband was so overshadowed by her disappearance that he forgot to mention that part—merely saying that she appeared during the antics of the lynchers—and Horace listened carelessly to the end.

He was secretly sneering at what he deemed his brother's folly in working so hard for nothing, but he concealed this opinion and observed at the end that he had certainly done his duty.

"I've done my best," said Barranca Bill, "but, together with her disappearance, is another circumstance I would like explained. When the girl saw me, the night of the riot, she at once claimed me as her husband, making a very affecting appeal. I was sorry for her, but as I never saw her before, of course I could not step into the husband's shoes."

"What did you say was her name?" asked Horace, who had grown suddenly interested.

"Helen Neville."

Horace pulled his mustache thoughtfully.

"Then, of course, you are Mr. Neville."

"No; she claimed that I was named Donald Lander."

It was lucky for Horace that his brother was at that moment filling his pipe, for the startled look which crept over the schemer's face could not have been explained by any ordinary excuse. Even his color changed, and with a grayish pallor on his face he stared at Bill as though a ghost had arisen beside them.

Fortunate, indeed, was this pause for Horace, and by a powerful effort he managed to control himself, though his smile was a sickly one as he said:

"I suppose she was old and homely."

Barranca Bill had ignited a match and he paused to get his pipe in action before he answered; an irritating delay to Horace.

"No; she was young and pretty, a neat little woman, scarcely more than a girl, with lady-like ways and a sad face. It seems this brute of a Lander deserted her, but her love did not die and she started to hunt him up. It was in that search that she met her fate."

Horace puffed furiously at his pipe.

"This is a good kind of tobacco you buy," he said, with assumed carelessness.

"Yes," admitted Bill; "better than many cigars."

Horace then proceeded to describe "the best brand of tobacco he had ever seen," and Helen Neville was not again mentioned; but an occasional far-away look on Horace's face indicated that he might possibly be allowing his thoughts to run upon her.

Soon after he retired to his own room and it was not ten minutes later when Hans Vedder announced a caller.

Barranca Bill directed that he be admitted, and soon after a short, stoutly-built young man with an evil, sly face, slouched through the door.

The superintendent's first impression was not favorable. Seen in a city, the visitor would have been pronounced a sneak-thief, and Bill did not feel his heart go out to him.

"How are you?" said the young man, somewhat airily. "Hope I haven't disturbed you."

"I am at liberty for a few minutes," said Bill, coldly. "Sit down and I will hear your business."

The young man smiled broadly.

"All right, old man," he said, tossing his hat on the table. "I'm ready for the start, and I'll begin by saying that my name is Luke Gridley."

Barranca Bill bowed coldly. The name sounded a trifle familiar, and he believed he had seen Luke before, but he did not succeed in placing his face.

"You may not be aware of the fact," continued Luke, "but I am the son—the eldest child—of Cephas Brown."

"Indeed!" said Bill, dubiously.

"Didn't know that before, did you?"

"No," said the superintendent, curtly.

"I see it don't please you."

"Don't please me!"

"Exactly."

"Why, confound your impudence, what have I got to do with it?"

"Of course you tumble to the fact that an additional child divides old Brown's money-bags."

"What of that?"

"Why, Miss Vivian don't rake the whole pot."

"See here, my man, what are you driving at? What have I to do with old Brown's money?"

"I mean that as I shall scoop in my half of old Brown's money, it will reduce the pile you get when you marry Miss Vivian."

Barranca Bill flushed slightly, and then forced a laugh.

"You have the cheek of a Government mule," he said, "but I am inclined to bear with you. Your claim on Brown is a matter between him and yourself only; while the intimation that I am to marry Miss Brown is a clear-cut fiction. If any one told you such a thing was to happen, they simply lied."

Gridley winked knowingly.

"Nobody has told me so, for the very simple reason that I believe only Vivian, you and myself know of the fact. The secret of Graveyard Gulch has been well kept."

Barranca Bill was wholly in the dark; but he decided to learn what ax this sinister young man wished to grind before he kicked him out of the door.

"Permit me to inquire what you know of the secret of Graveyard Gulch?" he distinctly said.

"I know that you are secretly meeting Vivian Brown there nearly every night," said Gridley, bluntly.

"Possible! How did you find it out?"

"I've seen you there myself. I've been around and had my ears open, and I know that though the trouble between you and old Brown obliges you to meet her secretly, you intend to marry her in spite of him. To show you that I am not dealing in fancies, let me say that night before last you met the fair Vivian at Grave-

yard Gulch, that you separated at the V path, and you were making tracks for home, when you heard her cry for help. You rushed back, and saw two roughs taking her away. You sprung upon them, hit out twice straight and hard, and they lay flat on the ground. Then you escorted her as near her home as you dared to go, and said good-night. Ain't I tolerably well posted?"

Barranca Bill remained silent, staring at vacancy. Luke Gridley had told some truth, at least. Bill had rescued Vivian as described, and she had been on the Graveyard Gulch side of the town, and as he reflected the recollection of some things then said which had seemed very strange to him came back with fresh force.

"By heavens!" he thought, "she had been to Graveyard Gulch to meet somebody—whom? Who is there in this camp whom she would?"

He paused abruptly and a startled look crossed his face. Luke Gridley claimed to have witnessed this meeting, and he had unhesitatingly declared that he recognized him—Barranca Bill.

The superintendent remembered the mistake in identity made by the men of Ramrod Bar, and a wild suspicion floated through his mind with almost the force of conviction.

The man who had met Vivian at Graveyard Gulch was Horace Lincoln!

For a moment Barranca Bill yielded to amazement, almost to consternation, and then he turned to Gridley:

"What is your object in coming here with this story?" he quietly asked.

"I don't hesitate to say I am hard up, and I thought you might be willing to give a few bits to a man who would work as your ally. Of course, as the son of old Brown, it is my duty to go to him and tell all, but I am not opposed to this match and I'd as soon be your ally as his."

"Well argued, my noble friend. I see you are a trump of the ultra caliber, but as I am a good deal mixed up on this matter I must ask twenty-four hours in which to decide just how princely shall be my conduct toward you."

Gridley looked at him suspiciously.

"You intend some trick; perhaps an elopement," he said.

"Upon my word of honor, no. It has struck me that if you are all you say we can be of service to each other, but I must have time to form my plans. You say you are the son of Cephas Brown. Perhaps you will explain."

Gridley saw no reason why he should not and accordingly related all of the Tennessee mountain episode that is already known to the reader.

"It strikes me if I were you, I should press my claim," said Bill.

"Well, the fact is I am lame on my proof. I have plenty of evidence as to my parentage, but there are some other impediments I must overcome before I fasten the screws on him."

"Exactly. Well, see here, Gridley, two heads are better than one and I believe we can both win a golden harvest by working in double-harness. Give me one day to revolve the idea and then come for your answer."

Luke believed he read sincerity in every tone and readily agreed to the proposal. No one knew better than he that he was at a standstill in his own fight, and he was not sorry to have as clear a head as Bill's to help him.

Accordingly, he agreed to all and took his departure.

"I have you, my fine fellow," said the superintendent, when once more alone. "It was at Weeping Willows I saw your face, and I strongly suspect that Hecate is the grandmother of whom you told me. I begin to see that there is a deep game, or a series of them, afoot, and as my identity has in some way crept in I'll appear in person."

CHAPTER XXXII.

HORACE PLAYS A BOLD GAME.

BARRANCA BILL's buoyancy of spirit soon vanished. He remembered the story of Graveyard Gulch and grew grave. Luke Gridley had asserted that he had seen him there, and he believed the fellow telling what he thought to be the truth.

"If Vivian Brown is meeting a man who resembles me at Graveyard Gulch, that man must be Horace Lincoln. Now, how did they become acquainted? He has been here but a few days—certainly not long enough to have formed the acquaintance and gained the good will of such a girl as Vivian. If she did not respect him she would not meet him like that, so it follows that they have long been acquainted, but why did not Horace mention the fact to me?"

Bill frowned. He had cautioned his brother not to leave the house, but it seemed that while he had been outwardly lamenting that he was all the time "cooped up," he had really been carrying on a system of deceit.

At this moment Hans Vedder entered.

"Shinaman bring von letter unt then co away," he said, extending a white envelope.

Bill received it and looked at the superscription.

There, in the delicate but handsome writing

of one undoubtedly a lady, he read his own name: "Mr. William Lincoln."

Considerably surprised he tore the envelope open and looked at the signature. There he read the name of Vivian Brown.

Still more amazed he hastened to read the note, which was as follows:

"MR. LINCOLN:—I am about to break the promise I made you and write a few lines, but it is because I cannot see how any harm can result therefrom and because I am so impatient to let you know what has happened. I may be foolish to disobey you, and I will not put my worldly wisdom against that of Barranca Bill, about whom all Comet Camp is saying so much, so if no harm comes of the letter, call it merely a woman's foible.

"Agatha has arrived. She is here in silks and diamonds. The long-dreaded time has come. She is not a bit as I fancied her, but a soft-spoken little thing who looks very innocent, but I am not to be deceived. I have no doubt she is Agatha, the Cricket. Do not fail to meet me as usual, for I am wretched. I hope you will say your detectives are on the track." VIVIAN BROWN.

"To Mr. William Lincoln."

We will not attempt to describe the varying expressions on the face of Barranca Bill as he read. For the most part the letter was a complete enigma, but one thing shone out clean and plain when the letter and Luke Gridley's story were placed side by side as evidence.

"Horace has been meeting Vivian, and she thinks she has met me. Now, by the gods, what does all this mean? My brain is in a whirl, and I can only see that Horace is playing some deep game. What is it?"

He devoted some little time to thought, studying the letter as he did so, and then soliloquized as follows:

"It is clear that Vivian believes she has been meeting me all this while; this wonderful resemblance has deceived her as it has every one else; and it also appears from her first paragraph that Horace has extracted certain promises from her which were calculated to make his false position more secure. Is my brother so bad as that?"

He paused, hoping to find some ground for a hope that there was a mistake, but it was futile attempt.

"What game is he playing? I should think it was merely one to marry Vivian for her money, but what of this mysterious Agatha? Ah! the girl says she hopes I will say my detectives are on the track. Ah! there is more here than I suspected. What is it? By my life, I will know; I will force the secret from Horace's lips. Brother or no brother, he cannot trifle like this; he may do that which, by the help of resemblance, will ruin me!"

Barranca Bill started up and took two steps toward Horace's room. Then he paused abruptly.

"What of Helen Neville and Abe Neal? Both mistook me for some one else; one called me a villain and the other sought my life. Can't be that Horace is the original of the men they sought—that he is Donald Lander and Ben Warren, as well as Paul Pindar?"

The face of the strong miner was a panorama then. He had tried to regard Horace with affection, because he was his brother, and he had turned a deaf ear to the evidence of the men of Ramrod Bar, but the lightning had at last fallen and the man stood stripped of his mask.

"Not content with talking so earnestly of honor when his hands were soiled with blood and crime," whispered Barranca Bill, "he has used my identity at Comet Camp to plunge into fresh villainy. And this man is my brother!"

His strong hand trembled until it shook the chair upon which it rested and his face was terribly grand. A passion which had slept for years was surging over him until his blood was on fire.

He took another step toward Horace's room and again paused.

"I must wait!" he muttered, huskily. "If I go there now I shall do something I shall regret. Let me remember he is my brother—if he were not I would—would—but, no, no; he is my brother!"

Alone in the little room Barranca Bill fought the battle with himself, and when he ascended the stairs he was calm though strangely pale.

Horace looked at him uneasily, reading some calamity in that set face.

"Are you ill?" he demanded.

"No," said William, slowly. "I am well, and yet I have received news that—that Read!"

Despite his self-control the last word came out somewhat sharply as he tossed Vivian's letter across the table. Horace raised it, looked at the signature and then changed color. It was his turn to be filled with consternation; for a while his face expressed emotions which were easily read by his brother; but before the letter was finished he had recovered all his nonchalance.

When he began his desperate game he decided that if the crash ever came he could do no more than to make a clean breast of the matter, bracing up a few weak points somewhat.

He ended his reading, and laughed softly.

"So the jig is up!" he said.

"Up! I should say so. Your mask is torn away, and yet you laugh. Were it my case I would hide my head in the deepest dungeon of the earth."

Horace looked astonished.

"Why, what do you mean? But, wait; it is natural, I suppose, and I ask you to hear my story before you judge me. Let me tell all!"

And then he told of the visit of Vivian Brown to the house; how she mistook him for William, and he allowed her to labor under the error rather than to betray himself. Her story of Agatha, their alliance and subsequent action were clearly told, but he claimed that he had done all out of philanthropy.

"I was under a cloud," he said, "and as I sat listening to her story I thought what a grand chance it was to do a good action and redeem myself. I thought men would forgive me for that unfortunate affair at Ramrod Bar, and that if I could once more hold up my head among my fellow-beings it would be a relief to more than myself."

It was a cunning, pathetic argument, for, spurred to the necessity, Horace was an excellent actor. For a moment Barranca Bill wavered; but, as plausibly as the case had been presented, it was too weak in fact to deceive his mind.

"And how," he continued, "do you explain your career as Donald Lander?"

This time there was no start; Horace was under control like a well-regulated engine.

"Lander? Who the dickens is he? Ah! wait, is he the man you said that missing woman was looking for?"

"Yes."

"Well, I don't know Lander. Did you think I did?"

"I think you are Lander yourself."

"I?"

"Yes."

Horace burst into a laugh, and then grew grave.

"Good heavens! do you want to connect me with every rascal in the land? Have I not suffered enough now?"

"Have not others suffered?" William retorted.

"See here, this is not kind. Do you forget we are brothers? Blame me if you will for this affair with Vivian Brown, for though I meant all for the best I may have erred, but do not go further, brother. I do not know this Donald Lander."

"How about Agatha, the Cricket, and Ben Warren?"

"The former is the woman Brown has put forward for his daughter, if appearances are reliable, but of Ben Warren I know nothing."

"Perhaps if Abe Neal should see you he would convince you that you were once Ben Warren."

"See here, Bill, this has gone far enough. I can bear a good deal from you, but not everything. You are piling on the agony too heavily. Give me air; give me the chance one honest man should give another, if not a brother's love and forbearance."

The speech was the personification of impudence, but it fell on Barranca Bill like a feather. It had suddenly occurred to him that it would have been wiser to have held his hand and trapped the schemer, and instead of expressing the condemnation he felt, he decided to try a different course.

"Of course we are past the sentimentality of youth," he said, "but no man shall say I pushed him to the wall. I'll invite Miss Brown over here to-morrow, and we will have this matter settled. I don't care to war on my brother, and we may straighten the crooked places in some way before we get through."

And in this way it was left when Barranca Bill descended to the lower part of the house.

The door was scarcely closed before Horace was transformed into a perfect demon in appearance. He drew his revolver and his face was full of a fixed purpose.

"You sealed your own doom, my precious brother!" he hissed. "You know too much, and your tongue shall be silenced. What Abe Neal failed to do I will accomplish, and then I will become Barranca Bill to all the world, as I now am to Vivian Brown. Vivian! Ah! even as I begin to fancy her I see her receding from my reach. By Heaven, I will yet win her and her money-bags. But how? The deed must be quickly done; I must think of the ways and means."

Dropping back in his chair he passed a long time without stirring. When he lifted his head the future lay mapped before him. Would his life boat follow the channel?

Immediately after supper he went to his room and put on the same disguise he had used when dining with Abe Neal, and, thus equipped, he made his way to the Weeping Willows.

What passed there will be made plain further on, but, as Horace bent his steps toward Graveyard Gulch, he was in a mood far from despondent.

Yet, according to his judgment, that night was to make or ruin him. He had wagered all on one bold move; if that succeeded he believed

he would be in a position where he would have strong friends. If it failed—well, he could expect nothing after that.

"If I can lure the girl to the old woman's den, she will be like clay in my hands. Once let her see Hecate and those amiable Lambs of hers, and Vivian will be glad to become Mrs. Horace Lincoln. Now, may luck be with me in the battle!"

The words were spoken as he reached the wild eastern wall of Graveyard Gulch.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HONEST GEORGE SEEKS HIS PREY.

The night was dark and gloomy. The season of the year was nearing that point where rain was liable at any moment to occur, coming on the heels of the dry summer, and Horace was more vexed than surprised to see dark clouds piling up against the sky.

Perhaps the prospect would frighten Vivian—but, no; she was as anxious for the meeting as he.

He had stood for perhaps ten minutes on the dark edge of the gulch when a light footfall reached his ears. He turned and saw Vivian.

"Oh! I am so glad," she said. "I feared you would not come."

"I could not deny myself the pleasure if I would," he said, with an unusually tender accent in his voice.

"You received my letter?" she went on, unheeding his own remark.

"Yes. So the Cricket has come?"

"She is here, silks, diamonds and cat-like ways. If she is not a hypocrite I never saw one. Oh! Mr. Lincoln, tell me you have found out just who she is."

"I think I have the matter down to bed-rock."

"You have? Tell me all, quickly."

"The principal part remains to be developed. You see as report after report came in from my best detectives that they were learning so little, I bethought myself of a simpler way. Who should know more of Agatha, the Cricket, than Abe Neal?"

"Abe Neal? I had nerved myself to seek that man and learn all."

A flood of exultation was reflected on Horace's face, but the darkness concealed it.

"You had?" he echoed.

"Yes."

"Well, by Jupiter, you have struck the right vein. I have found Neal, and he acknowledges he can tell a good deal about Agatha, but he is afraid. He refused to divulge. I spoke of you. He hesitated, and then said that though he would tell me nothing, he would tell all to you."

"I will go to him," said Vivian, quickly.

"Where is he?"

"At the Weeping Willows."

"The Weeping Willows?"

"Yes."

"Merciful Heaven! I dare not go there."

"I have made arrangements so that you will be wholly safe. A liberal fee to Hecate won her heart entirely, and she swears you shall come and go unharmed. While there I had a chance to see what control she exercises over those rather hard fellows who frequent her place and it is wonderful. I was surprised."

"Still I will not venture. Let Neal come here. Bring him to Graveyard Gulch."

"I would if I could, but the fellow has got a bullet wound in his side which may yet send him over the range. If he ever gets on his feet again it will be weeks hence. Of course, I went in disguise, or he would have torn me in pieces if he could, but the loss of blood has made him quite humble."

"And I must go to the Weeping Willows?"

Vivian spoke the words with an accent which told more than she said. She had a horror for the den and for the Witch that words could not express.

"It is, of course, unpleasant," continued Horace, blandly, "but I shall be at hand to protect you. If it comes to a fight, I know I can do well for you, but I am persuaded all will be quiet and peaceful."

Vivian scarcely heard the last words; she had remembered Katie, the servant of the Browns, whom she knew to be as brave as a man and nearly as strong, and in the excitement of the moment she felt that she would dare the trip thus guarded.

Horace was delighted. He explained elaborately how he would be waiting for her in his disguise when she approached the Weeping Willows, and then they left Graveyard Gulch.

Barranca Bill was pleased to see Horace go to his chamber after supper, for he had business which he wished to transact; but as he also had a suspicion that the latter might secretly leave the house, he stationed Hans Vedder where he could watch, directing that he should be called if there was anything new.

Hans promised, and five minutes later was asleep at his post.

Bill drew out paper, pens and ink and began to write rapidly. He had resolved to take up Vivian's case and solve the mystery of Agatha, and for that purpose he intended to employ one

of the keenest detectives of the West. The man had once been his partner in the mines of California, but was just at that time located in Virginia City.

Knowing that he had not forgotten their old-time friendship, the writer gave the whole story in detail, covering page after page in rapid succession, and forgetful of all around him.

This was at a time previous to Horace's departure from the house, and before darkness had fallen.

While he was writing a man approached the house, paused at the door and, finding no one on guard, walked in without ceremony.

At the door of the sitting-room he paused, his gaze fixed upon Barranca Bill, and for a while no sound was audible except the scratching of a very poor pen.

The new-comer's face was a panorama of deep emotions as he gazed, but all tended to one end; he was filled with a bitter hatred for the man before him—an overpowering desire to kill him and a fierce delight that he was alone.

And in his emotion as he gazed his breast began to arise and fall like a troubled sea, while his breath passed his lips with a deep sound.

The intruder was Honest George?

His appearance had changed a good deal since the day when Doctor Mundee first took him in hand and as he stood there his splendid form seemed unusually gigantic; but no one knew better than himself that he was not the man he was before Paul Pindar's bullet plowed through his side.

Had Mundee's advice been followed he would have remained at Ramrod Bar until the healing of the wound had become more decided, but the thought upon which he had fed all through his confinement had urged him to hasten to Comet Camp as soon as he could bear the journey.

In a bleak gulch near where he had lived, Square Rob slept with five feet of earth over his body, but Honest George lived, and lived for vengeance.

He had journeyed to Comet Camp as he had sworn he would, and he was there to kill Square Rob's killer.

Standing there by the door, his burning gaze fixed on Barranca Bill, he had no doubt but that he was looking on Paul Pindar and his broad breast arose and fell with suppressed passion.

It had been a part of his vow that he would kill Paul as Rob had been killed—without a show for self-defense—and yet he delayed his coveted triumph.

At the table Barranca Bill still wrote, but his pen was flying so fast that it forgot to scratch and only the ticking of the clock on the shelf broke the silence.

To Honest George that ticking seemed as loud as the booming of a cannon; Barranca Bill heard nothing but wrote on unconscious of danger.

The avenger drew his knife and crept forward like a cat, his lips parted, his eyes glowing.

"In ther back—atween ther shoulders! He shall die like ther dog he is!" he thought.

With wonderful caution he crossed the floor and stood above the writer's chair. He seemed to grow taller until he towered like a giant above his victim.

That face that had only smiled before Square Rob was killed, looked like that of a demon; it was the reflection of his thirst for blood.

He marked the exact spot between his victim's shoulders and raised his knife.

It wavered; his arm relaxed; he weakened. Then a fury swept over his face. He thought of the lone grave in the gulch and raised his hand again. He must strike for vengeance, for Square Rob.

Tick! tick!

The sound of the clock seemed to fill all the room, but its note had changed; it was like the beat of a funeral drum; it filled Honest George with the deepest gloom.

His eyes turned from his victim to the clock. It seemed to point an accusing finger at him. He closed his teeth tightly and turned back; the deed must be done!

His hand arose—grew rigid—wavered—relaxed.

Then with a light leap he moved back and, raising his arm again, hurled the knife down to the floor point first where it remained sticking and quivering in the board.

Barranca Bill leaped to his feet, turned, and the men were face to face.

Honest George pointed to the knife.

"Thar is ther sign o' war!" he said, in a deep voice.

His companion understood a portion plain enough.

"The sign of war! What do you mean? I don't know that you and I have any quarrel."

His expression was one of astonishment, but not a trace of fear was visible.

"Oh! we ain't no quarrel, eh? Wal, I've got a quarrel, an' ef you ain't a coward an' a sneak, you'll chip in. I might 'a' stabbed ye in the back, but thar is my knife, an' thar it will stay. You hev a bowie in your belt; pull it out an' come at me. I'll meet ye so!"

And he held up his empty hands.

The mine superintendent drew his knife with a jerk, and by a lightning-like movement buried

it in the board in such a way that the two, the handles touching, formed a letter X.

"There," said Barranca Bill, pointing to the quivering weapon, "is my answer. As my knife crosses yours, so will I meet you in fight, as man to man."

Honest George's eyes expanded.

"Take et up!" he cried, "take et up! I'm fifty pounds heavier than you, an'—"

"I don't care if you weigh a ton!" retorted Barranca Bill. "If you thirst for blood, put forward your carcass. I am not a fighting man, but he who calls me coward, *lies!*"

The speaker had folded his arms and, standing there, seemed perfectly calm except for the deep red which told of surging passion. For years he had studied to obtain that composure in crises, but he could not yet bear an insult unmoved.

Honest George passed his hand before his eyes in a bewildered way.

"I didn't expect this," he muttered.

"Of course not. You thought because you were a giant I would cringe before you. You mistake; I cringe to no living man!"

"And this—is this is Paul Pindar?"

"What?"

Barranca Bill started and spoke the word sharply.

"I say you have changed—Paul Pindar—"

"Are you Honest George?"

"Of course I am, but—"

"But I am not Paul Pindar. Have you made the same mistake as did the men of Ramrod Bar? I tell you I am not Paul Pindar, I convinced Sam Soaper the night he came to town; now let me convince you, the brother of the man who was killed at the Bar. I heard you had sworn to kill me, and I am glad you are here. I am Barranca Bill, superintendent of the Silver Ring Mine, and I can prove that I was at my post in the mine when Square Rob was killed."

He spoke with unusual emphasis, for he read very well the nature of the man before him. A great, muscular fellow with a heart as large proportionately as his body, he was one who would be a true friend and who would do no mean act.

Spurred on by his brother's death he had sought vengeance, but it was not that of a mean nature.

Honest George was bewildered. Like every one else he was deceived by the resemblance, but this bold front and heroic defiance were not characteristics of Paul Pindar. He would never give up an advantage, never meet an enemy on equal terms if he could avoid it.

"Thar's a blunder somewhar," he admitted.

"And I think it would be a worse one if we quarreled," added Barranca Bill.

The giant strode forward over the crossed knives and extended his huge hand.

"Put et thar!" he said. "You are not Paul Pindar an' I'm proud ter hev you fur a friend. This hand shall never be raised ag'in' you more."

"I'm proud to hold such an honest hand," replied Barranca Bill, "and may the acquaintanceship so strangely begun continue while we live."

It was a strange ending for a Western vendetta, but Honest George no longer doubted. He had not found Paul Pindar in Barranca Bill, but he had found a man so brave and noble that he was glad he had journeyed to Comet Camp.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

VIVIAN GOES TO THE WEEPING WILLOWS.

In the excitement of his interview with the man from Ramrod Bar, Barranca Bill entirely forgot Horace; and his recollection only returned when it became too dark for him to see his companion's face.

He started a light and went to look for Hans Vedder. That worthy man slept at his post, unconscious of the great scenes transpiring around him. He went to Horace's room and found it vacant.

"By my life," he said, "the plan has gone all wrong. Hans has allowed Horace to escape—to where? It may be he has left Comet Camp, but I suspect a meeting at Graveyard Gulch."

He returned to Honest George, and, after some trouble, succeeded in getting rid of him without giving offense.

"I'll go back ter Ramrod Bar an' get a leetle more strength," said he, "an' then I'll look fur Paul Pindar."

The events of the night had not weakened his desire for vengeance.

Barranca Bill wasted no more time, but, without awakening Hans Vedder, armed himself fully and started for Graveyard Gulch.

It was not a long walk, and he soon stood at the edge of the chasm. All was dark, silent and gloomy. The wind had a fashion of wailing through the place when moving with any strength, and with the slab-like rocks which seemed like grave-stones, it was no wonder that fanciful minds could imagine the complaints of the dead and buried.

Barranca Bill was thoroughly practical, however, and as he looked for possible occupants of the rocky recesses he thought of nothing else.

Not knowing the exact place of previous meetings, he consumed half an hour in search before he abandoned the hope of finding them.

"One thing more will settle this matter. I will go to the vicinity of Cephas Brown's house, and there I believe I shall gain a clew. If Vivian is inside I shall see some sign."

He strode back toward the village, and the wind sent up a fresh wail from the gulch as though to mock him. It was a disagreeable night. The darkness was intense; the clouds hung low and rain seemed inevitable, but he heeded it not.

He soon reached the vicinity of Brown's house. All there seemed as usual. Several windows showed light behind the curtains and Bill decided that Vivian was probably there.

"Such being the case, Horace has probably left town. Well, I am not sorry, and I will try to undo the mischief he has done."

He was standing by a boulder, unsuspicious that any one was near, when a hand was laid lightly on his shoulder. He wheeled quickly.

Before him stood a woman, and one glance showed that she was young, well-dressed, and of fine form, but her face was not familiar.

"Well," she said mockingly, "are you satisfied?"

Her tone checked the rising gallantry of his nature.

"Satisfied with what?" he brusquely asked.

"You have been surveying the house very attentively. I can surmise your reason."

"What is it?"

"You wished to see me." Barranca Bill looked at her in astonishment. Her face was a strange one and he was at first perplexed, but a suspicion gradually crept into his mind.

"Perhaps I did, madam," he said, "but I'll swear I wasn't aware of it. Instinct should have told me, if such was my object, but I never suspected it."

"Bah! why should we waste words, Ben Warren? Let us come down to business. I saw you from the window to-day, and I was not fool enough to believe I would escape your notice. Well, we are once more thrown together by fate; what have you to say?"

Bill was not slow to understand the situation. This little woman was the famous Agatha, the Cricket, and she had made the same mistake in identity which every one else seemed doomed to make; he had been mistaken for Horace, whom Agatha knew as Ben Warren.

He determined to let the mistake continue for a while.

"First, to congratulate an old friend on her rise in the world."

"Enough of that," she said sharply; "let us deal with facts. You and I are no longer friends; let us drop the mask and talk plainly. What are you doing? You have a more substantial air than you had in the old days. Then, burly Ben Warren had to depend on Agatha, the Cricket, for his sand."

"I'm better fixed now. I'm running a little private business in the Camp and laying up money. Still, I don't seem to approach you. If it wouldn't be impolite, I would like to know what position you hold in Cephas Brown's family."

"I am his daughter."

"Bah! that won't go down, my dear Agatha. I know you too well to suppose you were a princess in disguise in the old days. Come, what is the truth; what deep game are you playing?"

"There is no game!" she said, spitefully. "Look you, Ben Warren, you mustn't presume too far on our past intimacy. We have squared up the books and I told you we were done forever."

"Quite correct, but that don't binder me from feeling an interest in an old pard—"

"Stop; I can guess the rest. You see me in a good position and you are on the blackmail dodge."

The fair Agatha spoke with a venom in strange contrast to her usual soft speech.

"Not a cent in money," said Bill sturdily, "but I don't object to your confidence. Maybe you'll need an ally before the game is through. Trust me and I won't fail you. What's your game?"

He waited eagerly for the reply. If she could be induced to explain, the mystery would be quickly and simply solved.

He did not know Agatha, the Cricket.

"I see that you intend to be ugly," she said, in a steel-like tone. "I advise you not to attempt it, Ben Warren. I shall allow no interference with my plans."

"Perhaps there are those in yonder house who would not scorn me as an ally."

"In plain words—Vivian."

"Exactly."

"And you would betray me?"

"I feel the need of taking a hand in the game, and if you bar me out I don't see any chance except to go to Vivian," he answered doggedly.

During the last few remarks the Cricket had not been idle. She had secretly drawn a knife from her garments, and only the darkness concealed the fierce gleam in her eyes. She was

not one to let a life stand in the way of her triumph, and she intended that Ben Warren should go off the stage forever.

Barranca Bill had analyzed her as a woman without principle, but he was taken wholly by surprise when her hand went up and forward in a deadly stroke.

Only one accustomed to wild life could have saved himself, but Bill was a remarkable man in emergencies, and though taken so by surprise it came about that his broad hand closed over her wrist and stopped the blow.

"If it is just as agreeable to you," he remarked, "I had rather not be carved yet!"

She uttered a venomous hiss, and tried to free her hand; but with light thrown on her character he had no further scruples, but coolly disarmed her.

"You had better return to the house," he added.

She looked at him for a moment in silence, but he could see her chest rise and fall excitedly. Swept by the deepest passion, she had murder in her heart without the means of satisfying her hatred.

One moment she looked, and then, as though she had no words equal to the emergency, she turned and hurried toward the house.

Barranca Bill did not try to stop her. He watched until she disappeared, and then shrugged his shoulders.

"And this," he muttered, "is Agatha, the Cricket!"

Miss Agatha had not left the house on an aimless errand; but because she had seen Vivian and Katie secretly pass out by the rear door. Her curiosity had led her to start in pursuit, and the encounter with Bill had been the result.

In the meanwhile, Vivian and her companion had left the vicinity with their faces toward the Weeping Willows. They had muffled themselves in cloaks, ostensibly because of the impending rain, but really as a disguise; and as Vivian had been wise enough to assume an old, coarse garment belonging to the servant, one would have said at first sight that they were poor, ragged, awkward, and, very likely, old.

One more precaution had Miss Brown taken. She had armed herself well, and we have already seen that she had the courage to defend herself.

Katie had been given a revolver, but as she had never fired one she could not be counted on for good marksmanship, though she flourished the weapon with unbounded confidence.

"Begorra," she observed, as they went on, "we are almost at our destination, an' we will soon be hobnobbin' wid the old Witch."

"Is your courage still good?"

"It was niver betther. If yez say the worrud it's meself will cl'an'e out the W'aping Willows entoirely. It will be a bould sojer mon dhat will stand forinst me wid this Smith and Western pistol in me hand."

"Let that courage continue, but be wise; do not say anything to invite trouble. Be respectful to Hecate, and do not stare at the men, if we see any."

"Begorra, but dhey'll stare at me, onyhow," said Katie, who was not ignorant of the fact that she had a comely face.

"Keep your cloak about your face if you value your life. But—we—are—here!"

Vivian spoke the last words slowly and faintly as they paused at the door of the Weeping Willows. Her heart beat with great throbs. She had heard terrible tales about the den and its inmates, and Hecate had always impressed her with a feeling of dread.

As for the men, when honest people saw a particularly hard-looking fellow on the street, it was the fashion to say, "There is one of Hecate's Lambs." Now she was about to dare all the horrors of the place.

"Rap!" she said, to Katie. "I cannot."

Not in the least abashed, the maiden thumped soundly on the hard panel, and then Vivian remembered that her ally—Barranca Bill, as she believed—had instructed her to knock in a peculiar way.

She repeated the summons as directed, but in so faint a manner that she was surprised to see the door promptly open. The huge negro stood before her, but an elderly-looking man in blue spectacles pushed him aside.

"Enter!" he said, to Vivian. "I am Barranca Bill."

She recognized the voice of her ally and rallied somewhat, but the clang of the door behind them caused her to start.

"All is prepared for your interview with Neal," resumed the man in the blue spectacles—we may as well call him Horace. "He is in a pliable mood, but you need not be surprised at anything he says. He received his wound in a brawl, when he was drunk, and as he so cordially hates me he persists in saying that the row was with me. I will conduct you to his room and then remain outside while you and your maid interview him."

Vivian began to regain her usual courage. The Weeping Willows was not a place that pleased the eye, but it was so quiet that she began to think it might possibly have been misjudged.

Following Horace's direction, she entered a little room on the second floor and saw on the bed the same man who had told Brown about Agatha, the Cricket.

Abe Neal had not left the bed since he was laid on it at the end of the fight in the room below, and during the interval he had fought death hand-to-hand, as it were. Naturally very rugged, he had undermined his constitution by liquor until he was hardly in fighting condition, but at the time of Vivian's visit Hecate, who was a good deal of a doctor, had pronounced him out of all danger.

"This is Mr. Neal, I believe," said Vivian, with increasing courage.

"Yes, that's my name jest now, but they called me Steve Tyler when Ben Warren an' Agatha, the Cricket, swore my life away."

"Then Agatha is far from being an angel."

"An angel! Wal, I should say, yes! Ef she ain't a terror I never seed one, an' ef she's an angel I never wanter see another. But, see hyar, Hecate says I can't chin a good deal, so I'll come right down ter business. It war seven year ago that I first met Agatha, an' ther place was Vallejo, in California. She an' Ben Warren was pards then, and as they was rayther tony I felt a good deal swelled up when they tuk me in as a third corner. It ain't necessary fur me ter tell ye o' ther dozen odd jobs we did in a year, nor tell you in detail ther particulars o' how, when one on ther jobs went wrong, my pards turned dead ag'in me, swore ter lies an' sent me ter prison fur five year. That is my affair; you want ter know all I kin tell all about ther durned tiger-cat they call ther Cricket!"

"Yes; tell me all you know."

"Wal, that ain't much; leastwise, nothin' definite, fur what I know I picked up at odd times. Et seems, however, that her father was a 'Forty-niner name Flint, an' that he married a Greaser gal o' Southern California. I reckon they was mighty poor, for I've heerd the Cricket tell how she used ter leave their hut on ther mount'n an' go ter ther village o' the Injuns—ye know what California Injuns be—an' arter eatin' with them sleep in a den whar humans, dogs an' insects mingled on ekul tarms. That was Agatha from 'bout twelve ter fifteen."

"Go on," Vivian eagerly said.

"Wal, bein' o' a lofty taste she couldn't stan' it, an' she lit out an' went ter 'Frisco ter paddle her own canoe. I reckon she had a wheen o' ups an' downs thar, but she finally struck a gang o' critters who lived by plunder, an' thar got her name o' 'Cricket,' cause she was so actyve. I ain't got no particlars o' this time, but I know she worked ther hull o' California in various ways. Whar she met Ben Warren I dunno, though I kin tell ye all about her business with me."

Neal wound up abruptly. His story had exhausted him, and he was glad to stop. But Vivian's eyes were sparkling. She had heard the story of the "Cricket," so far as Neal knew it, and it only remained to prove that the Agatha of Brown's household was really this female criminal and the daughter of Flint, the 'Forty-niner, and she would no longer be able to parade as the eldest daughter of the Honorable Mr. Brown.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE LAMBS SHOW THEIR TEETH.

"You have not seen Agatha for over five years?" continued Vivian, questioningly.

"No; I ain't got my eye on her yet."

"Would you know her now?"

"Would I know her? You kin bet your last dollar I would. When I forget the Cricket it'll be because we are squar'!"

Abe Neal spoke with subdued fierceness.

"Very well, then, when you are able to go out you have only to drop me a note saying as much and I will show you a woman I suspect is Agatha, the Cricket. If it proves so, we will join our forces against her."

"Whar is she now?"

"Do not ask me to reveal that. Enough that she is where she will not think of going away; she believes she has walked into a golden nest, and there she will stay until you and I drive her out."

"You are ole Brown's daughter, an' I swar I can't see how you know o' her," said Abe, curiously; "but I s'pose it is all right. Wal, I agree ter your way o' fixin' it, an' you will find me around when I get out o' ther house."

Vivian was surprised to see him give way so easily, but she had accomplished the object of her visit, and her thoughts began to turn toward leaving the Weeping Willows. As quiet as everything had been, the air of the place seemed to stifle her, and she was anxious to go.

They left the room and, in the hall, looked for their ally, but he was nowhere to be seen. A deathlike silence was over and through the den.

"Where is Barranca Bill?" Vivian asked, anxiously.

"Well, he's not here, an' it's meself is thinking he has gone home or inter the bar-room for a drink. Shall I go in an' see?"

"No, no; not for all the world. He can care for himself, while it is our proper way to leave here as soon as possible. Follow me!"

She hastened down the stairs with the gallant

Katie close behind, and there was another surprise when they did not see the black giant on guard, but, not noticing that the walls of the hall had in some mysterious way been moved about, Vivian opened what she thought was the outer door and passed through.

It was not until Katie had closed the door behind them that the fact that they still trod upon board impressed Vivian as not only strange, but suspicious, and with the idea that they had opened the wrong door she suddenly paused.

At that moment, however, a bright light suddenly succeeded the darkness and the girls found themselves in the room where Abe Neal had been so hardly used the night he tried to murder Barranca Bill.

Vivian saw the tables, chairs, bar, glasses and other minutiae of a saloon, but in so saying the half is not told.

The chairs were occupied; nearly a score of Hecate's Lambs lounged about in positions of careless comfort.

In starting from the place Katie had made no attempt to conceal her features, and as Vivian had lowered her own muffler at the thought of a mistake, both stood with their faces exposed to the lawless gazes of the wretches before them.

We need scarcely add that every one was looking.

Vivian wheeled precipitately and caught at the door-knob. It turned freely with her hand, but when she pushed on the door it resisted with that grimness peculiar to an opposing bolt.

The door had been locked behind them.

The discovery brought a look of wild alarm to her face, but it was not until she had tried again that she would fully accept the truth.

In the mean time one of the "Lambs" approached them with a grin on his ugly face.

"I reckon you'll need ther key ter go out, my dear," he said, mockingly.

"Go along wid you, you gorilla!" retorted Katie, promptly. "We're not any dears av youn, at all, an' if that's phat yez are lookin' for you'd better take the ould Witch!"

A murmur of admiration ran around the room; a subdued applause in favor of Katie. Every wretch in the room was her admirer; they preferred her bold, almost masculine comeliness to the refined beauty of her mistress.

"Go an' get a new head, Lige Allen," one man said, in advice to the Lamb who had first spoken.

"It wouldn't do any barrum to the whole av yez," Katie independently retorted. "Your heads w'u'd make good winder clancers wid a stick fastened to wan end, though from the ridness av yer noses I'm afraid the hate w'u'd break the glass."

"For Heaven's sake, be silent!" whispered Vivian, who had rapped in vain on the door. "Do not arouse the anger of those men or we are lost. Oh! what does this mean; why has the door been locked upon us?"

"Bar-keeper, sling out two glasses an' a bot-tle o' Bourbon," said Lige Allen, rallying. "Tain't often we have sech angels at our fireside, an' I allow they won't come ag'in ef we let 'em go away dry."

"Sir," said Vivian, "will you show us the way from this house?"

"Why, o' course, my dear. Jest you gobble onto my arm an' it's did. Come with me, my pretty, an' I'll show you ther way home—Oh! I guess I will!"

Vivian at once retreated from his dirt-covered hand, but as he followed her she saw that only decisive action would save them.

Promptly she drew her revolver and the click! click! of the lock was followed by the straight and steady leveling of the barrel.

"Back!" she cried, in a clear voice. "Advance another step and you are a lost man!"

There was no mistaking the fact that she was in full earnest, and a hush fell over the crowd. Every one was looking at her, at last, and many felt a ripple of admiration. Her face was very pale, but all her courage was at last aroused.

"Now you hear us talk," said Katie, presenting her own revolver, "an' if we speake loud there'll be an earthquake. The tramp dhat has the key had better presint it before harrum is done."

A growl ran through the ranks of the Lambs. They were men who did not take disagreeable language calmly, and to be threatened by two girls was humiliating. Their temper began to arise, but what would have been the next act in the drama was left in doubt by a new move on Katie's part.

Wheeling, she thrust the muzzle of her revolver against the lock of the door and pulled hard at the trigger.

It was a miracle that the act did not result to her own injury, but as luck would have it her sudden idea worked to a charm. There was a loud report, a tearing of wood, and then the splintered door swung wide without a hand upon it and the way of retreat was open.

Before any of the Lambs could interfere, both girls darted through, but their hopes were speedily crushed.

They ran straight into the arms of Hecate and the man in the blue spectacles—Horace.

"Malediction!" cried the Witch, shrilly. "what does all this mean? My door—"

"Oh! Mr. Lincoln, take us home! take us home!" cried Vivian. "Those horrible men—"

"I reckon the jig is up," said Horace, angrily. "Our plans have fallen through and we have only one course left. You know what that is, madam."

He addressed Hecate, who needed no explanation, and like a hawk she swooped upon Vivian. Snatching away her revolver, she tossed the weapon aside and then caught the girl in her muscular arms and bore her away despite her struggles.

Horace attempted to do the same with Katie, and he succeeded in wresting away her revolver, but when the next act came on the programme the troubles began.

We have before referred to the unusual strength of the Irish girl, and when thus assailed she gave Horace an unexpected proof of her prowess. He was baffled at every point, much to the amusement of the Lambs, and when one of them finally came to his aid Katie's finger-nails had given his face a zebra-like appearance.

Still, the force of numbers prevailed and both girls were soon helpless prisoners in a room above, with Hecate and Horace as jailers.

Vivian's indignation had arisen superior to all other things and she looked at Horace with withering glances while he endeavored to replace the gray beard Katie had torn from his face but finally threw it aside with a curse.

"Come, my bold warrior," said Hecate, with a half-disguised sneer, "come down to business if you have any. This drama of yours is crowding all regular plays off the boards and I have other work to do. Talk plain English to your bird, here."

"Yes," said Vivian, spiritedly, "I want to know what you mean by this infamous conduct."

"I'm around to explain," said Horace, surly. "If there is any one who understands the game it is I. The fact is, I am playing for a big stake—your hand. Miss Brown, will you marry me?"

Vivian looked at him in utter bewilderment, her anger giving way in a measure to a suspicion that he was mad. Surely, Barranca Bill, whose praises all had sounded, was not the man to commit so dastardly a crime.

"That is a question I could better answer at my home, sir," she said, almost gently.

"Now is the time; here is the place. You know me; I am one of the foremost men of Comet Camp—second only to your father, I may safely say; and it would not be so bad a match. I love you and ask your hand in marriage. What is your answer?"

Her mood changed before his harsh, swaggering manner and she warmly retorted:

"No; a thousand times, no! My eyes are opened at last, William Lincoln, and I see that you have played me false. From this hour we are strangers."

"Not so fast," he said. "Remember where you are before you fly too high. The Weeping Willows is not the safest place for you, but with me as your protector you are safe. Left alone—well, below are the other men. Perhaps you prefer them to me."

"There is little choice," she said, shivering.

"Have your own way," he said, recklessly.

"Queen Hecate, will you summon your Lambs?"

"Ay, lad, that I will," the woman replied, as she started for the door.

CHAPTER XXXVI. COMET CAMP'S BIG NIGHT.

BARRANCA BILL was striding away from Brown's after his interview with Agatha when Gentle John and Bad Lung arose to his vision as they hurried toward him.

"Tarnal catamounts!" observed John, "this is a lucky meetin'. You are jest ther man I was arter, or, at least one on 'em. I'm takin' advantage o' my dignity as deputy-sheriff ter assemble a posse fur active service."

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Ther cow has kicked over ther milk-pail an' ther dogs o' war must be unloosed. Ther enemy is bowlin' right peart an' ther pins are all down but mine."

"Allee down but nine-ee!" echoed Bad Lung softly.

"Ther long an' short on't is, pard, I see'd a sight at ther Weepin' Willers as I was passin' it jest now which sunk deep inter my mind. I see'd old Brown's darter goin' inter ther Witch's den."

"Who?" cried Bill, sharply.

"Miss Vivian Brown, ter wit."

"Gentle John, you speak falsely."

"Gentle John—only one J—is my name, but ef ye doubt my word, byar is Bad Lung, ther squarest heathen in Nevada, ter sw'ar to it. You can't fool him, an' nobody can't fool him."

"Me see Miss Blownee; she goe in Weepin' Willow welly sure. No fool Bad Lung; his eyes gitee poor, he set 'em up ag'in."

Barranca Bill, however, needed no further proof. The events of the day and evening had flashed upon him and he felt sure that Vivian had been lured to the den by Horace.

The exact nature of the plot he had in hand was uncertain, but Bill could not doubt that something was decidedly wrong.

"Lose no time," he said tersely. "Away and gather a dozen men, and I will await you at the door of the Weeping Willows. By my life, if I find old Hecate in another plot nothing shall save her from justice."

He strode away without waiting for a reply.

"Wal," said Gentle John, slowly, "I should sorter remark that su'tbin' has riled him. He flew inter a flame like a brimstun' arter a skirmish with a nutmeg-grater."

"We gitee ploss, quick, else 'Meliken man git burtee so we no setee him up ag'in."

"Right you be, my genial friend, so away we go."

Barranca Bill reached the door of the Weeping Willows. The place was wholly dark and silent, but he had already seen how deceptive were appearances in all cases where Hecate had a hand.

What was transpiring within those unholy walls? Was Vivian Brown really there, and, if so, had the wretches dared injure her?

These and other questions passed rapidly through his mind, but he had found no way of answering them up to the time when Gentle John reappeared with a dozen stout men at his heels. All seemed heeled and ready for active work, while Bad Lung lovingly caressed the ten-pin with which he chose to fight.

Barranca Bill tried the secret summons by which he had gained entrance on a former occasion, but the combination did not work, and the party hesitated no longer. At a word from Gentle John they hurled themselves against the door, and it flew open, revealing the big negro calmly sitting in a chair.

He at once bounded up, but Gentle John thrust a revolver under his nose.

"Soft an' easy on ther right, uncle; don't obstruct ther alley, or down go your pins!"

It was an argument which worked well, but at that moment a door opened and one of the Lambs appeared to learn the cause of the uproar.

One look satisfied his curiosity, and he tried to close the door again, but the miners flung themselves forward, and he was sent sprawling into the middle of the room.

A little beyond, a glimmer of light proceeded from the room occupied by the roughs; but as the room was suddenly plunged in darkness, Barranca Bill caught an idea.

"Down on your knees, all!" he cried. "Look out for wild lead!"

It was a call the miners knew how to appreciate, and they promptly obeyed, while a moment later a dull roar shook the room, and a shower of bullets whistled over their heads.

"Up an' at 'em!" shouted Gentle John; and as one man they moved.

There was a scrambling along the floor, and then they surged through the door. The room was superlatively dark, and all had grown silent. Barranca Bill recognized the disadvantages of their position, and feared for his brave allies. The Lambs were on their own ground, they knew how to avail themselves of every point, and how to take their opponents at an advantage.

Luckily for one party, and unluckily for the other—only the result could determine to which belonged the respective words—the Lambs had chosen to settle the matter at close quarters.

There was a sudden stir, a forward rush, and then it was knife and muscle in a hand to hand conflict.

There was a horrible element about the affair, to comprehend which the reader has only to imagine nearly two-score men in a dark room, closely grappled, striking out with knife and fist, each engaging whoever came first to his hand, that one, perhaps, a friend.

Barranca Bill, however, did not forget that the odds were against his party; and when the rush was made he sprung forward with a definite object in view. Striking with both fists he passed the Lambs, receiving a slight gash in one arm, but bleeding it not.

He reached the table and mounted it; he struck a match and ignited both lamps.

The light fell on knot after knot of struggling men, who were fighting with the desperation peculiar to the West.

Crack! crash!

A sagacious Lamb had shot out one of the lights, but before the work could be continued something dropped on his head, and Bad Lung stood over him with his ten-pin.

"Setee 'em up on t'lother alley!" murmured the Celestial, gently.

Barranca Bill sprung into the thick of the fray, and for awhile the battle raged hotly. It need not be described in detail.

At last the surviving miners stood victorious with no armed foe against them. Some of the Lambs were dead, some had surrendered, and others had folded their wings and silently stolen away.

"All down but nine," observed Gentle John, looking around him with melancholy interest.

"Guard these men," said Bill, tersely. "Watson and Carr, follow me!"

He darted from the room as he spoke, followed.

by the men he had named, and Bad Lung trotted after.

"Mebbe they gitee pins knocked outee; me setee 'em up ag'in," muttered the man from China.

Barranca Bill caught up a light and ascended the stairs with his revolver ready for use. He expected further resistance, but no one appeared to oppose him. A ball ran through the building and doors opened off it on either side, in hotel fashion, and he looked into room after room without finding an occupant.

At last, however, as he turned a corner, he saw the giant negro standing in front of a door. Certain that the room contained some one of importance, he presented his revolver, when the man put forth both hands to show that he was unarmed, and then, touching his mouth and ears, shook his head.

It was a sign that he was deaf and dumb.

The miner pressed forward and the negro stepped one side, but Bill did not fail to see the glitter in his eyes. Suddenly he leaped forward with both hands outstretched at Bill's throat, but the revolver spoke twice in quick succession and the giant paused with a howl.

He had been shot through both hands.

A bar held the door, but Bill cast it off and entered. Vivian and Katie stood before him, the sole occupants of the room.

They had taken their stand side by side, and the Irish girl had assumed a weapon in the shape of a bed-post which had been wrenched from its place. Having been made in a country where wood was scarce, it was not cumbersome enough to be despised as a weapon.

"Kape your distance, ye murderin' tough!" she cried. "We'll die before we'll be taken again. Kape away!"

"Have no fear," said Bill, promptly, "for your danger is past. We came as friends, not as foes."

"Your friendship comes too late to deceive us," said Vivian, gaining courage as she saw the honest-looking miners.

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that, having once thrown off the mask, you cannot assume it again."

"Do you claim that I have been here before to-night?"

"Begoria, an' yez ought to know," said Katie. " Didn't I make the map av Oireland on yer face— Begorra, where have the scratches gone to?"

"Have you not yet solved this mystery?" asked Barranca Bill, addressing Vivian. "Don't you comprehend that the man in whom you have been placing your trust was a fraud—in short, that he was not William Lincoln, but Paul Pindar?"

Katie's last exclamation had quickened Vivian's ideas. Five minutes before, when her captor left the room, he had marks on his face, the scratches made by Katie's nails, which he seemed likely to carry for many a day; now he appeared to them a man wonderfully like him, but with a face unmarked.

The last words of Bill recalled the visit of the lynchers and the mistake in identity they were said to have made, and the truth flashed upon her.

Before her stood the genuine Barranca Bill; the man who had captured them was indeed a fraud and, doubtless, Paul Pindar.

"I do see," she said, hastening toward Lincoln and giving her hand. "If I have wronged you I beg your pardon; and I hope it is not too much to ask your protection now."

"It was for that very purpose that we came here, and you owe me no apology. One question, however: Where are your captors?"

"Old Hecate and the man who claimed your identity were here less than ten minutes ago, but they hurriedly left when the noise sounded from below."

"And have doubtless made good their escape."

Barranca Bill spoke without any regret. The crimes of his brother had forced him to make war upon him, and the affection he had tried to breed had died away, but he was not anxious to see him in the hands of justice.

"Let the miserable man go his way," he muttered.

Just then Bad Lung approached him.

"Black 'Mcican man tlyee run away; me hitee him over headee. All down but nine-ee," he mockingly said.

Barranca Bill aroused. Bidding the girls feel at ease he led his party down-stairs and found all about the same as he had left matters. Some of the miners had been hardly used in the fight, but they held the fort.

The superintendent thought of Helen Neville, who had appeared and disappeared with meteor-like rapidity, and ordered a thorough search of the building. It was made, and Abe Neal was found, but there was no sign of any one else.

By this time all Comet Camp was aroused. The news that the Weeping Willows had been attacked and carried by storm spread fast and a thoroughly sympathetic crowd gathered about the den of inquiry.

Barranca Bill heard their cr'es; he heard them call for the application of the torch to the house which had so long been a disgrace to their town and he offered no word of remonstrance.

He stayed the more precipitate of the crowd, however, to insist on another thorough search that no human being, however guilty, should suffer a horrible death; but as he led the search his mind was ever on one point.

Where was Helen Neville—what was the secret of her disappearance?

The mystery remained unsolved, and when the place was again searched, it was fired in a dozen different spots by as many zealous men.

The flames ate slowly for a while, but gathering strength, seized on the wood and lapped eagerly at the walls, as though anxious to consummate the doom of the Weeping Willows.

Outside the miners were watching, and as the light began to show plainly they grew excited and sent up cheer after cheer, their zeal being all the more emphatic because they were anxious to atone for so long allowing the den to stand in their midst.

At the end of ten minutes the fire had taken strong hold and wrapped flooring, wall and roof in its embrace, and as it went on and red sparks soared upward, the miners yelled themselves hoarse.

It was a big night for Comet Camp, and the blindest of men could see that Hecate would never be allowed to run another establishment in town.

The days of the Weeping Willows, of the Witch and of the Lambs were passed as a feature of the Camp.

Pandemonium broke loose when the roof went crashing into the fiery furnace; hats were flung in the air, and the cheers of the spectators were dimly heard at Ramrod Bar.

"All down but nine!" said Gentle John, with a whoop.

"Nebber setee 'em up ag'in," observed Bad Lung.

"That's solid," added Barranca Bill, who had seen Vivian safely home and returned to the ruins.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE SECOND AGATHA.

THE sun shone brightly on Daddy Gray's little hut on the mountain, for it is a characteristic of the King of Day that he shows no partiality between the palace and cabin, and as the rays reflected from the roof it looked like an egg-shell hung on to the mountain-side.

Within Daddy Gray and Doctor Mundee were watching with subdued breath for the result of that slumber from which the young doctor had said the mysterious patient would awake to live or to pass at once away.

She had slept long, and their anxiety increased with each passing moment.

Mundee's eyes were keen for those of a young man, and as he noted each phase of that fateful slumber he finally turned to the old man.

"Have hope," he said. "I believe there is a change for the better."

"I hope it'll be so," said Gray, earnestly. "It is strange how I have become interested since I took her up down there in the gulch, but I couldn't be more interested if she was my own granddaughter. Don't spare any expense, doctor; I'll pay the bill."

Mundee made a quick gesture.

"I am not laboring for money, but for a life," he said earnestly. "You can not be more interested than I. This girl's face—"

He paused abruptly. He did not care to have Daddy Gray know all that was in his heart; he did not care to acknowledge even to himself how much he was interested in a woman of whom he knew nothing except that her name was Agatha.

Agatha—what was the other name? Her feverish lips had never revealed the secret, and if she died, it was liable to be a mystery to the end of time.

People appear at the West, live for awhile, then die without a word and are buried without a ceremony. Who they are, or from whence they came, is often unknown. Perchance, as in the case of Daddy Gray, a sobriquet is their only known name.

The patient stirred, her features moved, her eyes opened. Her gaze was directed full at Doctor Mundee, and as he read all, he felt like throwing up his hat like a schoolboy. The crisis was past; with proper care the girl would live.

He saw the wonder and perplexity which began to creep over her face and smiled cheerfully.

"Have no fear," he said, gently. "You are with friends, and we will do all that is possible for you."

Her lips moved to utter a whisper.

"Something horrible has occurred; I cannot remember what, but I have been very ill."

"You have, but all that is past. You are now on our way to recovery, Miss—I have forgotten your name."

He had given her a medicine which she drank without argument, but at the last word her head was again on the pillow.

"I am Agatha," she answered, simply, and her eyelids drooped as she again fell asleep.

At the end of two days the sick woman had greatly improved. Her gain was so rapid that

Mundee was astonished; she seemed to pass from one extreme to the other as by a bound. Her mind, too, had become perfectly clear, but she vouchsafed no further information in regard to herself, and her friends asked no questions.

Both were as devoted as ever; Mundee after the earnest, keen but quiet fashion of his nature, and Daddy Gray with the patient kindness we have before marked.

He had a surprise one morning when Agatha addressed him abruptly:

"Tell me how I came here," she said.

The old man started, hesitated and then told the whole story except that he glided as lightly as possible over what seemed likely to excite her.

She heard in silence, and then said:

"If you will ask Doctor Mundee to come here, I will tell my story. You two seem to be the only friends I have on earth, and I want some one to hear what I have come to Nevada for. Then, perhaps you can advise me."

"I am sure we will do all we can," said Gray, more earnestly than usual. "We have taken an interest in you—that young doctor watched over you when the fever was raging, as anxiously as though you had been his sister—and you can depend on us. Then, if you need fighting-men, miss, why, there are those down at Ramrod Bar who would cut and shoot till the sun went down."

Agatha smiled faintly, and looked after Daddy with grateful eyes as he went to call Mundee. They came in together soon after, and then she told the story of her life so far as she knew it.

"I have lived in the shadow of mystery all my days," she said, "and the veil bids fair to remain forever. I am one of those strange beings who cannot even tell their own name. Eighteen years ago a woman, who lived in a humble cabin on the Mississippi bank of the river of the same name, was one day surprised by the entrance of a well-dressed man who bore a girl-baby in his arms. He asked permission to leave the child for an hour or two while he looked around the vicinity, and Mrs. Bemis, proud to be thus trusted by a rich man, freely consented.

"The stranger went away and never returned for his child. Surprise, doubt, alarm and other emotions came to the good woman and her husband, but time passed and the situation remained unchanged. They tried to learn from the child her name, that of her parents and her home, but the little girl had but three words in her vocabulary: her infantile pronunciation of 'father' and 'mother,' and another word which was like 'Ag'tha,' and which they judged to be her own name—Agatha.

"To make my story short, let me say that the child remained on their hands, despite the information they gave the authorities; that the child was myself, and that I grew to maturity in their charge; but that their worldly condition so improved that I received a very fair education.

"Now I come to another epoch in my life, which will explain why I came to Nevada."

Doctor Mundee bent eagerly forward.

"Two years ago we were living on a ranch in Kansas, when a man named Donald Lander came to the neighboring village. He was handsome, brilliant, and to my eyes, all that was noble and manly. We met, and he seemed to take a strong fancy to me. He came often to the ranch, and the matter went on until—we were married."

Doctor Mundee started back, and a gray pallor settled over his face. His lips framed the word "Married!" but no sound was audible.

"Let me pass quickly over what is so painful to recall. A short period of happiness followed and then he—the man I loved—tired of me. I saw it, but closed my eyes until, one morning, I found him gone, and in his place a note that said we had made a mistake, that he had found he did not care for me, and that he hoped by separation that I would soon forget. I was deserted."

"The brute!" Doctor Mundee breathed through his teeth.

"I bowed to the inevitable, and for a year scarcely stirred from the house. Then a Kansas man, who had just returned from the West, brought news that he had seen Donald Lander in Comet Camp. The statement electrified me, and I resolved to seek him; so, alone and friendless, I journeyed to seek my husband."

Mundee drew back until his face was in the shadow, and Agatha, continuing her story, related what we have already placed before the reader in telling the experience of Helen Neville; for it is already clear to all that the Agatha of the mountain cabin was the same as the woman who had claimed Barranca Bill as Donald Lander, and who had been for one brief occasion the unhappy "Nightingale" of the Weeping Willows.

From the point where we then left her, her story may be abbreviated to a few words.

Fearing that she would lose this rare prize for whom she had risked so much, the Witch of the Willows resolved to for a while secrete her in the mountains, and for that purpose she was placed in a carriage and driven away over the Ramrod Bar trail.

Helen, as we will still call her, though that was a name merely assumed for her Western journeys, saw that this was her last hope of escape; and, leaping from the carriage she took to the mountain side and ran on with the roughs in pursuit.

Terror made her nearly insane, and long after the pursuit was abandoned, she sped along over the rocks; on, on, wildly, almost blindly, until a fall from the rocks nearly ended her life and brought her under the care of Daddy Gray, as we have seen.

Doctor Mundee had listened to this long story with painful interest, and as he had allowed certain hopes to possess him while acting as her physician, it was a severe blow when he learned that she was married.

His nature was, however, a noble one and he put all selfish thoughts aside.

"You have suffered a good deal," he said, "but from this hour you have two champions, hasn't she, old friend?"

Neither of the young people had been looking at Daddy Gray; neither had seen that he had fallen into what seemed almost a doze; but he had aroused abruptly now.

"Where was she, lad?" he asked. "Ah! I remember; at the river, in the cabin where a man left a baby while he went for an hour to look at the river scenery. Now, do you know, it seems as though I know something about this matter?"

"You, Daddy?"

"Yes; for I can see that cabin, and the woman, and the little girl. I believe I knew the man, too, but when I try to place him my head whirls. I almost get the idea, and then it slips away. What did you do with the watch-chain he gave you as a plaything while he was gone?"

Helen's eyes opened widely.

"You know of the chain—you?" she cried. "Why, how is this? I have not mentioned that there was a chain, but there was, and given as you say."

"By my life!" cried Mundee, "here is a clew at last. Gray, Gray, you are the man who left the girl-baby at the cabin and you must be—"

The old man put out his hands.

"No, no; it can't be," he said. "That man's name was not Daddy Gray."

"And yours is not Daddy Gray."

"Why, so it isn't, but what is it, then? I am all mixed up and lost, and my head goes round and round."

He pressed his hand over his head with such painful confusion that tears came to Helen's eyes, but Mundee's expression grew more resolute. He had a suspicion in his mind which even the girl had not yet grasped.

"Daddy," he said, earnestly, "I beg that you will no longer delay the operation which we have planned. I am firm in the belief that a little skilled treatment is all that is necessary to restore to you your memory. The opinion of your fellow-miners to the contrary notwithstanding, I tell you that you have at some time received a blow on your head which has disarranged the bones, and left a portion pressing on the brain. Such things are by no means rare in surgery, and as I have said before, I believe I can bring you through all right."

"Well, doctor, you shall have the chance," the old man answering once more, as composed and gentle as he always was when he made no effort to think. "If you can give me a new head, I want it."

Mundee promptly arose, and went to his case of tools; but Helen's face grew troubled.

"Is there not danger in this operation?" she asked.

"Not when skillfully conducted. Believe me, I shall do nothing which can possibly injure our old friend."

"I have grown strangely interested in him since he spoke of that chain. Surely, doctor, he knows something of that affair at the cottage. Can he be the man who left me there?"

"Rest easy, and you shall soon know. I am about to give back to Daddy Gray his past."

With these words he approached the old man.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE DAY OF JUDGMENT.

WHEN Horace Lincoln deserted the Weeping Willows it was with a full consciousness that his day of success was forever gone, so far as Comet Camp was concerned. He had clung to the idea of compelling Vivian to become his wife, and thus pouring at his feet the wealth of Cephas Brown, but when he knew the old den was attacked by the citizens he thought only of saving his life.

With the prospect of another lynching affair at hand, he entirely forgot Vivian.

Nor was Hecate reluctant to take part in his flight. Reading with her usual judgment the fact that this was no ordinary uprising, and that the Weeping Willows was doomed, she only paused to summon Luke Gridley, and then effected her escape.

Horace, on his part, glided through the village with the cowardly air of a sneaking coyote, took to the hills, and hastened on at full speed until breathless.

Debouching from a canyon, he gained a more elevated place, and looked back.

The Weeping Willows was one sheet of flame, and on the air the shouts of the miners arose to tell how dangerous it would be to return. He was practically an exile.

We need not dwell on the events of the next two days. He remained in a small cave—a mere hole in the rocks—nearly all the time, and his only food was some fragments of bread he chanced to find where they had been cast by some previous camper.

His hunger became intolerable and he resolved to seek food at any risk. He had observed a cabin on the mountain side which seemed to hang like an egg-shell in mid-air, and to this he resolved to go, trusting to luck, and gain food. Then, with his strength renewed, he would venture a midnight flight from the vicinity.

He started for the cabin, but not more than half the distance had been traveled when a shout arose behind him. He looked around. A dozen men, with picks on their shoulders, had paused to look at him, as their path crossed his, and he recognized several men of Ramrod Bar.

"Paul Pindar! That is Paul Pindar!"

The cry terrified the miserable wretch and he took to his heels and sped along the mountain. His crimes were bearing him down and he had not the moral bravery to breast the tide.

The miners did not hesitate; down went their picks and then they tore along the mountain. A desperate race was begun; a race for life.

Horace ran with all his speed, but when a hundred yards had been traversed he saw that his pursuers, strong and sure-footed, were running him down.

Still he went on, wildly, desperately. He began to pant, the perspiration rolled from his face and his aspect was as wild as that of a madman.

Instinctively he had kept the cabin in view when running, and as he clearly saw that he could not outstrip his pursuers he resolved to apply there for protection. Just how this was to be given against a dozen men he did not pause to reflect.

Reaching the place he sprung through the half-open door and stood looking wildly about. A sea of red seemed before him and it was not until he had brushed his hands before his eyes, while his breath came in great gasps, that he saw a woman in a chair.

He flung himself on his knees at her feet.

"Save me!" he cried, wildly, lifting his hands; "for Heaven's sake, save me! I am pursued by men, human fiends, who seek my life. Save me! save me!"

There was no reply, and in an agony of cowardly fear he dropped lower and lower and kissed the hem of her dress as a dog seeks a favor of his master.

"Donald!"

The single word was enough to bring his head quickly up and he looked wildly at the pale face before him. Then he sprang to his feet, clasped both hands to his head and recoiled as from a specter.

"Agatha!" he whispered, hoarsely.

Yes, it was Agatha—Helen Neville; and thus the husband and wife met after many months. It was a strange freak of fate which led the guilty man to kiss the hem of the dress of the woman he had wronged.

Doctor Mundee, who had been seated a little at one side, arose and gazed with a face almost as pale as that of the woman who was thus between the husband who scorned her and the man who loved her so hopelessly.

Helen was herself very pale, but the nature of the case somehow gave her a courage not to be expected.

"Yes, it is I," she said, almost calmly. "What have you to say, Donald?"

A shout down the gulch aroused the miserable man to a sense of his peril. His enemies were close at hand, and he hovered between life and death.

"I have this to say," he cried, "that we were separated by a base plot. I love you still, devotedly, passionately. Oh, Agatha! believe in me and save me. Bloodthirsty enemies are on my track, and my life is lost if they find me."

Helen stood in irresolution. In the inner room Daddy Gray slept deeply after the operation performed on him by Mundee; a sleep very much like her own, since he would awake of sound mind or a confessedly hopeless case; and there Donald could be placed, though the little room would be no concealment if the other men should enter.

A louder, clearer shout showed that they were at the door.

Doctor Mundee started. The temptation of his life was before him. If the men should carry out their purpose and lynch Donald Lander there would be no obstacle between him and the woman he loved. Why should he not stand idly and see them work their will?

For one moment he hesitated, wavered, fought with temptation; then with a ringing step he strode to the door.

He met the lynchers at the threshold.

"Stop!" he said firmly, placing his hand on

the shoulder of the foremost man. "You cannot enter here!"

His voice and his manner were so potent that all paused, but they did not forget their errand.

"But see hyar, boss, we don't mean any harm. We ain't after you, an' we won't disturb the cabin. All we want is Paul Pindar."

"There is no Paul Pindar here."

"But we see'd him enter; he must be hyar. Look ye, we are on the squar', and we b'long ter Ramrod Bar. Call Daddy Gray an' let him hev ther floor."

"Daddy Gray is ill, and if aroused from his present slumber may die. Go back, men, go back; leave me with your old friend. Don't you know me? I am Doctor Mundee."

The lynchers hesitated, but just then several more men appeared to view, with Gentle John at their head and Bad Lung trailing in the rear like the tail of a comet.

"Hello, hyar!" said the former, genially; "thar seems ter be a meetin' o' some sort in progress. Mebbe you'll let me inter ther alleys!"

"Paul Pindar is inside, an' we're goin' ter hev him," said a burly miner.

"Paul Pindar! Wal, I want him, too, an' ez I'm deputy sheriff o' Comet Camp I reckon you won't kick ag'in' my takin' him."

At this moment Bad Lung plucked at John's sleeve.

"Plaul Plindar gitee out through roofee," said the Celestial, pointing upward.

Gentle John's revolver darted from his belt.

"Stay right whar you be," he said, sharply. "I've got ye lined, Paul Pindar, an' ef ye knows when ye are sound on ther goose you'll come ter tarmas."

Aided by Helen, Horace Lincoln had improved the delay secured by Mundee to attempt escape by way of the roof but Bad Lung's eyes had been too keen and with the turning of Gentle John's revolver his last hope was gone.

Inclination or terror caused him to release his hold and drop inside the cabin, and when John bounded through the door he found him senseless from a collision with a chair against which his head had struck.

Gentle John took possession of him in the name of the law, and the men of Ramrod Bar surrendered their claim when they saw the situation.

Mundee went to the side of Helen who was stoically calm.

"Bear witness," he said, "that I tried to save him."

She gave her hand, surmising more than he thought.

"You did, and you are brave and noble. May all blessings be yours."

"Ef I may raise my tuneful voice," said Gentle John, "I'd ask ef ye remember me."

"I do, indeed," said Helen. "You were my guide on the night of the riot and you were faithful."

John had come to the cabin because he had heard of the mysterious female patient and hoped it was Helen. That part had resulted as he wished, but he was not so sure about Horace. He doubted if Barranca Bill would approve of the arrest, but for his own part he wanted to take the man to Cephas Brown's.

At Helen's last word the inner door opened and Daddy Gray came forth, but on his face was an intelligence long unknown to it.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

CEPHAS BROWN HAS VISITORS.

THE Honorable Mr. Brown was far from being a happy man, despite the wealth with which he was surrounded. As Vivian had suspected, he was playing a game in introducing Agatha, the Cricket, into his house. Not one drop of his blood flowed in her veins, and he had such good reason to apprehend that certain persons in Comet Camp would understand that something was wrong that, after several vain attempts to get rid of these persons, he decided that he had better take his family and leave the town for awhile.

Accordingly, preparations secretly began the day after the burning of the Weeping Willows, while by his directions Agatha kept out of sight.

He would have been still more alarmed had he known what she had concealed from him; that she had encountered, as she believed, one who knew all about her past life.

And Agatha, the Cricket, who would have hired an assassin had she known to whom to apply, watched each hour for the coming of Ben Warren.

Vivian had seen Barranca Bill once after the fire, and when he declared that if Abe Neal's story was true they would soon have proof that the Cricket was the child of Flint, the Forty-niner, she felt that she had then an ally upon whom she could safely lean.

Barranca Bill, on his part, kept his eyes wide open for Abe Neal. That man had been brought out of the burning house on a blanket, but, the moment he was free from scrutiny, had silently gone away. Since then he had not been seen.

All the "Lambs" except the captured and dead had vanished in the same fashion, and the crooked form of Hecate, the Witch, was no longer seen in the streets.

Comet Camp had verily purged itself of wickedness, and when a temperance lecturer began business in a saloon he had purchased and cleared of its seductive beverages, the citizens began to feel themselves quit moral, but it pains us to put on record the fact that the landlord of the Cosey Corral had never sold so much liquor as since the exodus of the Lambs and the coming of the lecturer.

On the third day after this exodus Cephas Brown arose with the belief that noon would see him leaving Comet Camp behind, but at precisely ten o'clock Hecate and Luke Gridley walked into his sanctum, as he sat writing, without any ceremony whatever.

"The front door was ajar, and we are here," said Luke, coolly, as he tossed his hat on the table.

"You infernal rascal!" roared Brown, "how dared you enter my house again?"

"Now, don't ride rusty, governor, don't!" implored Luke. "Remember I am your eldest child and—"

"It's a lie!" shouted Cephas.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Hecate, "don't you see me, my bold Roderic Raymond? Perhaps you'll give me the lie, but when I say I am the mother of Dora Hilton, whom you married up there in the Tennessee mountains, you may not fly so high. This young man is my grandson, your son, Cephas Brown, alias Roderic Raymond, and I can swear to it. Oh! I have all the evidence straight, and woe be to you if you refuse us justice."

The Honorable Mr. Brown had grown sorely troubled. Luke Gridley was bad enough, but he had once been in Hecate's ranch and knew her by experience as well as by reputation, and he would sooner have encountered any man in Nevada.

"What do you wish?" he sullenly asked.

"That you make Luke your son and heir in the face of the world."

"I'll see him in perdition first!" roared Brown.

"When you get there, send your street and number and I'll call," said Gridley, elevating his feet to the table.

"You are a bold man to refuse when we have such thorough evidence," said the Witch, looking keenly at Cephas.

Immediately after Gridley's first call on the politician, he had received news from the East that Brown had been given an absolute divorce from his wife, Dora Hilton, many years before, and the plotters had been awaiting an answer to the letter inquiring if this was really true.

Sheer desperation had forced them to make the present visit, and Hecate was studying their man to try to learn if the divorce was a fact or fiction.

"What proofs have you got?" he irritably asked.

"All that are necessary; enough to convince any jury in the world."

"Well, you can't convince me," growled the politician.

Dark thoughts were in the mind of Mr. Brown, and he clearly saw that he must wage war on a pretty fair proportion of Comet Camp's population to maintain his present position. On the occasion when he was at the Weeping Willows, and so narrowly escaped damage, he had gone to seek for some one to act the assassin, and he now saw that Hecate and Gridley must be included under the ban.

"Do you defy us?" the Witch asked, menacingly.

Brown hesitated, but at that moment the door was again opened, and Agatha entered.

She glanced at the visitors with an apprehension which gradually died away, and then at Cephas.

"Pardon me, father," she said; "I thought you were alone."

"Aha!" cried Hecate, "so the young bird says 'father'! Upon my word, this is strange. How numerous is your family, my bold Cephas?"

"Woman," shouted the politician, "get out of my house before I throw you out!"

"It'll be a long day before you do that, governor," said Luke Gridley, as he drew a revolver and began polishing the barrel on his sleeve. "We have teeth."

"This is outrageous!" cried Agatha, who had the courage of a young tigress. "How dare you speak so to my father?"

"We dare, because we hold the fort; but as for your father, we have a good deal of doubt about the bold Cephas being anything of the kind."

"If I might add my warble, I'm struck with the same impression."

The last remark was made from the door and the quartet wheeled to see Gentle John standing at the threshold.

Brown's wrath arose to the boiling-point.

"How dare you intrude here?" he shouted, springing to his feet.

"Bein' a deputy-sheriff, I goes where I sees fit. Don't get riled, ole man, fur I hev a posse at my heels an' somethin' might happen ef ye did."

"Allee down but nine-ee!"

Bad Lung spoke with his usual gentleness and

his round face appeared over John's shoulder like the moon rising from behind some mountain peak.

And then in marched a dozen other men, among whom Barranca Bill was noticeable.

The quartet looked very much disturbed, and they had reason. Brown, Agatha, Hecate and Gridley had each dabbled more or less in crime until they had cause to fear any man who claimed to be a deputy-sheriff and brought a dozen men to back him.

"I hev said that I doubt your bein' her parent," said John, addressing Brown, "and I repeat my carol. Et don't stan' to reason that a female would marry her father, you know."

"Villain! what do you mean?" cried Brown, who was begining to tremble.

"Not bein' an orator I won't try ter tell ye, but ef you'll keep your ears open this gentleman will chant a song which will make all clear."

A keen-looking young man pressed to the front, but Brown gave way to his passion again.

"Stop! I will not hear you," he shouted.

"It don't make a jot o' diff'rence ez ter that," said Gentle John, "but ther rest o' these people shall. I say it, an' I'm a deputy-sheriff."

"All I have to say can soon be told," said the young man who was announced to chant. "I've been investigating the record of yonder woman," pointing to Agatha, "and I find that she was born in California, twenty-two years ago, daughter of one Flint, a Forty-niner, and Dolores del Oro, a Mexican woman. She lived with her parents on the slope of the Sierra Nevada until eight years ago when she ran away, went to Frisco and became an adventures. There, too, she got the sobriquet of the 'Cricket.' If any one wants her history more fully I can fill the bill, but for now let me come down to a late event."

"Three months ago, at a little town near Virginia City, the Cricket became the wife of Cephas Brown. I can prove all this clean and sure, and, maybe, Cephas will now chip in and say why he brought her to Comet Camp to figure as his daughter."

"It is all a falsehood, a foul falsehood!" cried the politician madly.

"You waste time, my dear sir. Gentle John, bring in your next witness."

The deputy-sheriff raised his hand and through the door came Horace Lincoln. He was pale and haggard, but as his freedom had been promised, despite his crimes—it was the last good turn Barranca Bill intended to do him—he was calm.

"Do you recognize this woman?" asked the detective, tersely.

"Yes, she is Agatha, the Cricket," Horace replied.

"You will swear to that?"

"Yes."

"Coward!" hissed Agatha, spitefully.

The ci-devant Ben Warren shrugged his shoulders and slouched back to the rear of the group.

During this little episode, Hecate had leaned over to Luke Gridley and whispered in his ear:

"I think we had better go," said the Witch.

And they were gliding cautiously toward the door, when Barranca Bill barred their way.

"Don't hurry," he said, coolly. "The loaves and fishes will come by-and-by."

"It is nothing to me," said she, wavering between fear and defiance. "I have business elsewhere."

"Tarry yet awhile, fair Hecate. We have a story for the next act in our drama which will interest you. Wait and hear all."

His manner spoke more than his words, and she shrunk back cowed, while Bad Lung pensively observed:

"Barranca Bill heap scaree Witchee. Allee down but nine-ee!"

CHAPTER XL.

IN WHICH THE RECORD CLOSES.

THE detective made a sign to Barranca Bill and then fell back to the rear while the superintendent came to the front.

"We will now proceed to clear up what mystery hangs around this affair, and I know from my own experience it is pretty thick in places. First, I have a bone to pick with one Hecate, commonly called the Witch. Gentle John, bring in the next witness."

The deputy-sheriff waved his hand and Helen Neville entered, leaning on the arm of Doctor Mundee. Hecate saw her and almost paled; her fright was enough for it, but neither a blush nor a pallor could creep through her rhinoceros-like skin.

It was a good deal of satisfaction to see her who had ruled so fiercely at the Weeping Willows, and overawed the stoutest of her Lambs, frightened at last.

"Madame Hecate, allow me to introduce to you the 'Nightingale,'" said Barranca Bill, gravely. "Anon, we will talk more. Gentle John, the next witness."

"Bring in ther king-pin!" said the deputy, in a loud voice.

"Setee 'em up muchee!" added Bad Lung.

Cephas Brown was sitting quietly, but it was because he was planning. So far, he did not

seem to be in serious trouble and he hoped to struggle through.

Looking up now, he saw enter the same man who had assaulted him the night the lynchers came to town—Daddy Gray—but the sight moved him but little.

Daddy Gray it was, but a vast change had passed over him. He looked stronger, younger and more intelligent, and he carried himself erect and with dignity.

"Mr. Brown, do you recognize this man?"

"I ought to; he once assaulted me," growled the politician.

"But your mind does not go back further than that, I suppose?"

"No."

"Then let me help you a little."

Daddy Gray took the chair offered him, without speaking, while Helen looked at him anxiously from across the open space and Doctor Mundee leaned over her chair. Of course it was right for the young doctor to watch over his patients, for he had saved one from death and the other from idiocy, and it was natural that Helen should look upon him with gratitude.

"Something like twenty-five years ago," began Barranca Bill, "there lived in New Orleans a young man named Cephas Brown. He was very rich, but that did not prevent his falling into poor health and his physician advised country air. He went to Tennessee and there met a young woman, a school-teacher, with whom he fell in love. She was as poor as poverty itself, but as Brown had no false pride he married her. Alas! for his venture; she proved to be a perfect fiend in regard to temper, and at the end of a few months he deserted her.

"In going to the mountains, a whim had led him to assume the name of Roderic Raymond, and as his identity was unknown, it struck him he might forever conceal his marriage to the shrew; so when he went, he took with him such records of the marriage as he could find. I don't pretend to pronounce a verdict on his course."

"Reaching New Orleans, he told his story to a friend, who declared that a divorce might be obtained. How and on what grounds it was obtained I won't pretend to say; enough that it was a legal and absolute divorce, which forever shut off Dora Hilton, her family and her heirs."

Barranca Bill looked at Hecate and Luke Gridley, but they had nothing to say; and he continued:

"Then Cephas Brown went abroad and made a tour which lasted several years. Events of importance occurred during that period. Brown married, but in fifteen years was a widower with one child—a girl-baby. He was at that time in an English town, and there he remained for a year, when he sailed for the United States accompanied by his little daughter Agatha and his secretary, Miles Howard."

Barranca Bill paused again, and this time glanced at the politician. That individual looked pale and started.

"The trio landed at New York," continued Bill, "and from there journeyed slowly homeward, using the Ohio and Mississippi rivers as a means, after a visit to Cincinnati. Thus fate, one day, brought them near a little town of the State of Mississippi, nearly opposite the mouth of the Arkansas, and they were examining the locality because Brown thought of purchasing. Agatha—the little girl—was an impediment to their movements, so Brown left her at a little cabin and went on alone with his secretary.

"Miles Howard was not an angel, though he looked so much like Brown that they had often been mistaken for one another; and this fact had led Miles to often think how easy it would be, if Brown should die after his long absence, for him—Miles—to appear and claim the identity of the rich man.

"This same thought entered his head that day on the bank of the Mississippi, and it came with such force that Miles resolved to murder his master; so he struck him over the head with a stone and, believing he was dead, threw his body in the river. Afterward he saw that the last move was foolish, but it did him no harm at the time.

"Then Mr. Miles Howard went to New Orleans and tried his game. It worked to a charm. He became Cephas Brown, and Cephas Brown he has been to this day."

"It is false, foully false!" shrieked the politician.

Daddy Gray arose with a quick movement, strode to the table and brought his fist down upon it with a force which nearly shivered it.

"Miles Howard, you lie!" he cried. "I am Cephas Brown!"

Dead silence reigned for awhile in the room, but those who were amazed at the declaration, looking at Daddy Gray as he stood erect and folded his arms, saw that his gray hair and beard were indicative of an age not rightfully his.

Even when Barranca Bill was telling of his crime, the politician did not suspect the whole truth—he had entirely forgotten Daddy Gray—but now he arose with trembling limbs, wild

eyes and pallid face; arose and looked fully at the man he had wronged, and then fell back—dead.

This unexpected event caused a break in the revelation, but when Doctor Mundee had said that life was really extinct, the politician's remains were removed to another room. It was the old story; heart disease, great excitement and death.

The remainder of the revelation need not be given in detail; but Barranca Bill explained Miles Howard's career after his deceit began.

He had added to the original fortune of Cephas Brown, and, in the West, had become a man of some fame, but he did not forget that there was a possibility of his being deprived of his false honors and wealth, and from this grew the idea which placed Agatha, the Cricket, in his household.

Remembering the daughter of the real Brown who had been left at the cabin by the river, he argued that if his mask was ever torn off, he would not only have a means of stemming the tide of vengeance, but a hold on the Brown fortune if he could marry the heiress; and having no fear that the real Agatha would ever appear, he conceived the idea of putting in her place Agatha, the Cricket, to whom he had taken a fancy.

The result was the marriage and her introduction into the household, but before she appeared on the scene she had been near Comet Camp, under his protection, and the drama witnessed on the cliff by Barranca Bill and Gentle John was but playfulness on Brown's part when he surprised the Cricket admiring nature.

The blood on the rock was presumably that of a goat killed by a hunter.

Having already traced the fortunes of the genuine Agatha by means of her narrative, we have only to say that the real Cephas Brown did not perish in the Mississippi, but how he was saved must remain an unsolved mystery, as that period of his life between his injury and his appearance at Ramrod Bar, where he came to be called Daddy Gray, always remained to him.

The blow dealt by Miles Howard had injured his brain, and it was not until twenty years later that he was cured by Doctor Mundee's skillful surgery. Then all his early life was clear and vivid, and it did not take long to establish the fact that Agatha, alias Helen Neville, was his daughter.

Once more in possession of his mental faculties, he could take up the thread of life where he dropped it, and he was no longer simple Daddy Gray.

We need not linger over what followed.

Luke Gridley, baffled and cowed, and forever shut off from the Brown fortune by the terms of the divorce, was allowed to go, and he went so thoroughly that he was never seen at Comet Camp again; but Hecate, stubbornly held by Deputy-Sheriff Gentle John for her cruelty to Helen Neville, saw fit to commit suicide in her cell, and so ended the career of the Witch of the Weeping Willows.

At Barranca Bill's earnest request, Gentle John allowed Horace to escape, but his career was fearfully short. The next morning two bodies were found side by side outside the Camp, lying where they had fallen after a desperate fight. They were those of Horace Lincoln and Abe Neal.

William Lincoln felt sorrowful over his brother's wretched end, but the world was no loser when the man of many aliases went off the stage.

Agatha, the Cricket, took courage and laid claim to the fortune of her dead husband, but Barranca Bill threatened her with arrest for other crimes until she consented to sign a paper acknowledging the receipt of all that was due her.

Then, furnished with fifty dollars for expenses, she shook the dust of Comet Camp forever from her feet.

Honest George, of Ramrod Bar, expressed some sorrow that the slayer of Square Rob had died by other hands than his, and then settled down to work like the big-hearted man of honor he was.

We have saved the brightest scenes for the last, but the reader scarcely needs to be told how the real Cephas Brown, wholly free from the troubles of the "Daddy Gray" days, resumed his own and was happy in the love of his daughter, Agatha; nor how that rising young surgeon, Lewis Mundee, prevailed upon her to forget her widowhood at the end of a year and become his wife.

In the sunshine of his love, her old life seems scarcely more than a troubled dream.

Vivian mourned for her father, but in Barranca Bill's endeavors to make her burden less heavy, it came about that they fell in love as young people will. Hans Vedder and Katie were present at their wedding—and, so was Gentle John and Bad Lung.

"Ef I might raise my warble," said the deputy-sheriff, "I should say ther ranks o' single men are thiunnin' fast. All down but nine! I feel lonesome, but Bill is a lucky man. Miss Vivian beats ther best bonanza o' ther silver diggin's."

"Bllanca Bill strike it richee," added Bad Lung. "Gal muchee nicee. Me goes to alley now; mebbe 'Melican man wantee playee; me setee 'em up!"

"Wait for ther refreshments, Bad Lung."

And the Heathen waited.

It is time for us to go, however, and we will only add that Comet Camp has enjoyed a good reputation ever since the fall of the Weeping Willows, and that her people still point out their greatest man in the person of Barranca Bill.

THE END.

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